



THE SPIRITUALITY OF GRANDPARENTING

The Spirituality of Grandparenting
 Rev. Dr. Glenda Hollingshead; August 11, 2024
 12th Sunday after Pentecost
 Psalm 71, Deuteronomy 4:1-12

This morning, we continue the sermon series on spirituality with a look at the sacredness of grandparenting. Being a grandmother myself, I admit that I have truly enjoyed preparing today's sermon. It was a particular delight to read Ralph and Beverley Milton's book, "The Spirituality of Grandparenting." I found myself laughing and crying and sharing with my dear husband—more often than he probably liked—one story after another. So, let's begin with some of the wisdom I found between the pages.

Ralph Milton's one-sentence summary of the entire book is: "Our spiritual vocation as grandparents is to delight in our grandchildren." Then he goes on to relay the following story:

Zoe was three, I think. She was leaning back into her grandma Bev, who had her arms gently wrapped around her grandchild. Zoe's eyes were half closed, as were Bev's. They

had that “all-is-well-in-my-world” look. They were rocking and singing. When each song was finished, one of them would start a new one and the other would join in. I had never really thought of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* or *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* as hymns. They’re not included in any hymnbook I know of. But I realized how profoundly spiritual such songs can be—that their spirituality depends not on the words or the melody, but on who is singing the song. And to whom. And with whom. And why. Zoe and her grandmother rocked and sang, quietly, gently, one song after another, some of them several times. Neither of them was thinking much of anything. They were just being with each other in deep and intimate communion. That’s when I realized that *The Itsy Bitsy Spider* can be a hymn. Sacred. Beautiful. Holy.ⁱ

In one section of Milton’s book, grandparents are described by grandchildren. Here are a few of the remarks: They don’t say, “Hurry up.” They wear glasses and funny underwear. They have to answer questions like “Why isn’t God married?” and “How come dogs chase cats?” My grandmother is a lot like God; they are both old. Grandpas always have time for you when everyone else is too busy. When they take us for walks, they slow down past things like pretty flowers and caterpillars.ⁱⁱ

From Milton’s point of view, the very young and the very old have a lot in common. They are closest to God for the newborn has just come from there and the very old will soon return. There’s a legend that has been bandied about for some time. Though it is unlikely factual, there is a ring of truth to it. As the story goes:

A mom and dad had brought home a new infant son to meet his older sister now just four years old. She was very attentive to her new brother, but then surprised her parents by asking if she could be in the baby’s room alone with him. The parents were a bit hesitant, but they had a baby monitor so they would be able to hear whatever was happening. So the very young girl went into the room with her infant brother. Over the baby monitor the parents heard her ask, “Tell me about God. I’m starting to forget.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When I hear such words, it makes me think of the wisdom of Jesus as interpreted by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*:

I’m telling you, once and for all, that unless you return to square one and start over like children, you’re not even going to get a look at the kingdom, let alone get in. Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child, will rank high in God’s kingdom. What’s more, when you receive the childlike on my account, it’s the same as receiving me.^{iv}

From our beloved children and grandchildren, we may find the kingdom of God opening to us—if only we have eyes to see. So, let's take a moment to share something we have learned from a grandchild. (Share.)

While there is much to be learned from children, there is much to glean from the wisdom of our elders, our grandparents, who can share stories of the faith and wisdom that comes from living a long life—if only we have ears to hear. Furthermore, grandparents are in a unique position to offer support to young, stressed-out families and to pass on faith traditions by modeling a spiritually mature life filled with love, kindness, patience, and prayer. Now, let's take a moment to share something we have learned from a grandparent or grandparent-figure. (Share.)

In an article entitled “My Faith Journey: The Spirituality of Grandparenting,” Elise Seyfried wrote:

The prophet Ezekiel tells us: “And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one” (Ezekiel 22:30). We can stand in the breach for our grandchildren. Pray hard for them and for the unknown challenges ahead. We can also share with them our faith stories, table graces, bedtime prayers and what being God's beloved children means to us. And, with help from the Spirit, those messages of trust and hope will travel with them, far into a future we can't even picture.^v

Grandparents can have a tremendous influence over the lives of the next generation. And even if we don't have a grandchild in our family, that does not mean we can't make a difference in the life of a child. One important thing we can do is to pray for the children around us—including the young folks of our own church family. We can also be a vehicle for blessing children in word and in deed—at every opportunity.

Rachel Naomi Remen is a physician who has been counseling those with chronic and terminal illness for decades. In her book, *My Grandfather's Blessing*, she shares how her grandfather was such a huge influence in her life even though he died when she was only seven. Her grandfather was a Jewish Rabbi, and every Friday, after they had tea together, he lit two candles and had a word with God in Hebrew. As Remen recalls,

Sometimes he would speak out loud, but often he would close his eyes and be quiet. I knew then that he was talking to God in his heart. I would sit and wait patiently because the best part of the week was coming. When Grandpa finished talking to God, he would turn to me and say, ‘Come, Neshuem-le’ (which means beloved little soul). Then I would stand in front of him and he would rest his hands lightly on the top of my head. He would begin by thanking God for me and for making him my grandpa. [After he spoke to God

about me in some detail] he would give me his blessing and ask the long-ago women I knew from his stories—Sarah, Rachel, Rebekah, and Leah—to watch over me.

These moments were the only time in the week when I felt completely safe and at rest. My family of physicians and health professionals were always struggling to learn more and to be more. It seemed there was always more to know. It was never enough...But my grandfather did not care about such things. For him, I was already enough.^{vi}

In the eyes of God—children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents—we are all enough. And we don't earn God's love and acceptance. It is freely given. All our Abba Father wants in return is a relationship with us—much like a grandchild climbing up on the lap of a grandfather to hear a story, to sing a song, or simply just to be. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ Ralph and Beverley Milton, *The Spirituality of Grandparenting*, 9.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 36-37.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid. 28.

^{iv} Matthew 18:3b-5, *The Message*

^v Elise Seyfried, "My Faith Journey: The Spirituality of Grandparenting" <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2020/06/my-faith-journey-the-spirituality-of-grandparenting/>

^{vi} Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. *My Grandfather's Blessings*, 22-23.

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