“Family Matters”

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Deuteronomy 6:4-9
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Since I’m talking about family today, I need to say something from the outset. There are no model families. Every family is dysfunctional, each in its own way.

Allow me to personalize what I’m saying. I’m not a model dad. Some things I did well; some things not so well. Every family is dysfunctional, each in its own way.

Some of you will bristle at the thought of labeling your family this way. Yet, how could it be otherwise? Sin has worked its way into family life also. We tend to compare our family with other families that are more obviously dysfunctional. The problem with comparisons is they are so subjective.

It might help you to know there are no model families in the Bible either. Take the first family. Adam and Eve no sooner leave the garden than their two sons enter into a quarrel that leads to murder. In fall 2012, we spent 12 Sundays telling the story of Jacob, who schemed with his mother to deceive his father and brother out of the family birthright and blessing. Last fall, we revisited David’s story. David may have been a man after God’s own heart, but he was hardly an exemplary husband and father.

Some of you will be tempted to check out of this sermon on families. You will assume it’s intended primarily for people with families of their own. Wrong! It’s in everybody’s best interest for our church to talk about healthy functioning families.

God created the family as the primary means by which faith is transmitted to children. The myth that perpetuates in church circles is that it’s the church’s primary role to teach faith to children. Some parents drop their children off for Sunday school with the expectation that it’s our job as church staff and volunteers to teach religion to their children. We play a vital, indispensable role in this transmission process, but there’s no substitute for parents and families who model faith for children.

I suspect that the reason that families abdicate their spiritual responsibility is because they are intimidated by children’s questions. Children are natural theologians. It’s not a stretch for them to conceive of a Creator and see design in the world. They have a natural inclination to
embrace wonder and mystery. This would explain why they come out with all sorts of interesting questions that we’ve never even considered.

Don’t be afraid to tell children you don’t know the answers to their questions. Children need to know that you still believe without knowing all the answers. Why don’t you treat their inquiry as an opportunity to learn right along with them?

The passage I read earlier is absolutely foundational to Jewish (and Christian) belief. Orthodox Jews recite this passage as the first words of every day and the last words each night. It’s called the Shema, for the simple reason that the first word in the passage, Shema, is the Hebrew word for hear. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Although Christians affirm God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we join in the affirmation that God is one.

The most familiar verse of the Shema is the command to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind” (Deuteronomy 6:5). Loving God with heart, soul, strength and mind equates to loving God with our entire being.

When Jesus is asked about the most important commandment, he quotes this passage from Deuteronomy. Then he adds a second command from Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is a natural follow-on to the first command (Matthew 22:34-39). These commandments aren’t original with Jesus. Rather, Jesus is the first to link them together as matters of first importance.

This command to love God flows naturally into the next admonition, “Impress these commands upon your children” (6:6). There’s nothing haphazard or casual about this transmission process. Just as parents are intentional about getting kids to soccer practice and music lessons, so we are charged to teach these commands to children.
This intentionality is reinforced by the admonition, “Talk about these commandments when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7). This instruction isn’t restricted to formal classroom settings. Our best teaching times are often natural, everyday moments.

If you’re reading our VPC devotional, you noticed yesterday’s devotional makes reference to this Deuteronomy 6 passage. The book Think Orange references four key times that families can leverage to build faith in children.

The first time is meal time—the equivalent of the verse “When you sit at home.” The frenetic pace of family life today is robbing families of precious meal time. Parents are so busy shuttling their children from one skill-enhancing activity to the next that family meal time is compromised. We can’t turn back the clock, but we don’t have to succumb to the busy trap. We need to fight for family time.

Chris and I asked our kids standard questions that parents ask at dinner, such as “how was your day today?” There was a stage in our kids’ adolescent development when they would answer this essay-type question with a single word reply like “fine” or “okay.” This was an unacceptable answer in our home. If we are offering you a free meal, the least you can do is tell us about your day. So, we arrived at a compromise: Tell us one good thing that happened as well as one thing that frustrated or disappointed you.

The second time is drive time—“when you walk along the road.” Drive time is strategic for engaging in significant conversation without the competing distractions of home life. I’m hardly a model parent, but I excelled at drive time.

It was standard operating procedure that when you rode in my car you couldn’t listen to the radio. This was before the days of cell phones and
social media, but I believe the same principle still holds true. If you ride with me, we talk about real stuff.

The third time is bedtime—“when you lie down.” Bedtime was such a battle when our kids were young. As parents, we were often tired at the end of the day, more so than our kids, who were ready to rock and roll. They became quite proficient at extending bedtime. We found if we pushed through our fatigue, bedtime presented an ideal occasion to engage our kids in conversations about faith.

Several Christian educators espouse a bedtime practice called Faith 5. This method is built on the premise that investing five to ten minutes consistently before bed with children can contribute significantly to their spiritual development. First, ask children to identify their highs and lows for the day. Second, read a verse or passage of Scripture (such as Deuteronomy 6 or a passage from our VPC devotional). Third, talk about how the highs and lows might possibly relate to Scripture. Fourth, pray with children about their highs and lows. And fifth, close with a blessing for the children.

The fourth time is morning time—“when you rise up.” Morning time in our home was such a struggle to get our kids ready for school on time. It’s possible to carve out a few minutes to offer an encouraging word to your children as they begin their day. I can remember how a few poignant words or a sentence prayer could set a wonderful tone, both for their day and ours.

I came across a longitudinal study recently conducted among 360 families over 50 years. The results of this study are published in a book entitled, *How Families Still Matter: A Longitudinal Study of Youth in Two Generations*. One of the key findings of this study is that families who are most effective in transmitting faith to children do so with warmth and affirmation. It’s not enough to teach the right beliefs. Teaching the facts doesn’t count for much if children don’t feel close to their parents. No
amount of instruction will make up for a lack of warmth, affirmation and unconditional love.

This study also highlighted the critical role of grandparents in this transmission process. Grandparents factor big-time into passing along faith to their grandchildren, especially when they are warm and loving.

One editor for this study, Dr. Vern Bengstom, was for years a sociologist at USC. Dr. Bengstom was raised in a devout Christian family. He recalls that all 33 of his first cousins were committed Christians. When he attended the University of Chicago, Vern began to back away from his religious heritage. This caused his family considerable heartache. He was not a churchgoer in his years as a college professor.

When Vern Bengstom retired from teaching, he awoke one Easter morning in 2009 and resolved, “I think I’ll go to church today.” He remembered a church he had driven by countless times but never thought about attending. He decided to give it a try and slipped into worship just after the service began. As he entered, the choir was singing, the organ was soaring and light was streaming through the stained glass windows. He said of that moment, “I was overwhelmed. I felt like Saul on the road to Tarsus. I had a religious experience. It was like C.S. Lewis put it, ‘Surprised by Joy.’ I joined the choir and now I’m in church again.” He imagines his parents looking down from heaven and saying, “Well, what do you know? The prodigal has returned.” This story ought to give hope to those of you disheartened by family members or children who have turned their backs on faith. Who knows whether the seeds of faith planted in young people’s lives today will produce a bumper crop tomorrow.