Turning Hearts

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Malachi 4:1-6

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The last verse of the Old Testament really, really intrigues me. “He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and children to their fathers” (Malachi 4:6). Of all the things to be said at the end of the Old Testament, I never would have expected the last word to be about family.

The book of Malachi functions like a hinge, connecting everything that has transpired in the Old Testament with everything to follow in the New Testament. Malachi anticipates a coming Day of the Lord bringing judgment and salvation. This hardly surprises me, given everything we have been reading about in *The Story*. But I never would have expected the final word to be about family.

Jesus will bring salvation in the most cosmic terms possible. He will defeat the diabolical forces of Satan and usher in the coming kingdom of God. But his salvation also impacts family life. Jesus will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers. He can restore human relationships and heal families. His salvation not only concerns the afterlife, it affects this present life. Jesus can redeem families. I’ll say more about families later in this sermon.

Malachi writes this prophecy 400 years before the coming of Jesus. The two remaining southern tribes called Judah have returned from exile. They have successfully rebuilt the Jerusalem temple and repaired its city walls. The initial euphoria of coming home has worn off and lethargy has set in. People are just going through the religious motions. Even the priests have become bored with the things of God.

Malachi opens with a word from the Lord: “I have loved you, says the Lord” (1:2). The people’s response to this love offer is rather jaded and cynical: “How have you loved us?” God’s people are struggling to believe God really loves them. After all, their economy is stagnant and their religious life is in the tank.

For the next three chapters, Malachi points the finger back at the people. They have become lax about worship (1:6), disingenuous about making sacrifices (1:7), indifferent to God’s Word (2:6-7), disobedient to the covenant (2:10), faithless in marriage (2:11-16), blind to the poor (3:5) and stingy with their offerings (3:6).
We come to the verses read moments ago. Malachi announces in the last chapter, “Surely the day is coming…” when God will bring judgment on proud evildoers and salvation for the righteous (4:1). The proud refers to all who think they do not need God. It will also be a day of salvation “for those who revere my name” (4:2). It will be a day of healing to those who love righteousness, “the sun of righteousness will rise, with healing in its wings.” The joy of this coming Day of the Lord is likened to calves frolicking in open pasture after being penned in indoor stalls.

This coming Day of the Lord brings to mind two famous patriarchs in the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah. Moses represents everything God has done and said in the past: “Remember the law of my servant Moses” (4:4). Remember is the operative word. Remember, remember and remember!

Elijah represents the whole company of Old Testament prophets: “I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the Lord” (4:5). Since Elijah did not die a natural death but was transported to heaven in a chariot, it makes sense that he will be the one to inaugurate this coming day of the Lord.

This would also explain why Judaism has been so adamant that Elijah’s return will precede the coming Messiah. The Jewish people still set a place at the Passover Meal and pour Elijah a cup of wine to anticipate his return.

But is this reference to Elijah literal or figurative? The angel Gabriel announces to Zechariah and Elizabeth that they will have a son whom they are to call John who “will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children…to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Jesus announced that “This [John the Baptizer] is the one about whom it is written ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way before you’…He is the Elijah who was to come” (11:10, 14).

This messenger will herald the coming of One who will restore human relationships and heal families. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and children to their fathers.
The Bible opens with a couple named Adam and Eve and their two sons, Cain and Abel. When sin enters this first family, everything blows apart. Eve tempts Adam, Adam blames Eve and Cain kills Abel. If you are a member of a dysfunctional family, it may bring you a measure of relief to know that God works with dysfunctional families to accomplish his redemptive purposes. If the Old Testament begins with a family and ends with a family, we would do well to pay attention to family.

When we talk about family, I need to come clean with you right from the outset. I’m not a model dad. I did some things really well and other things less well. But I can attest to something after all these years. Following Jesus turns my heart back to my family. Jesus softens my heart and brings me back to the power of forgiveness and compassion.

As I reflect on parents in my generation, I can see now with greater clarity how so many of us were all about helping our children become scholarship athletes, concert-level musicians and stellar students. We were not nearly so diligent about teaching our children how to follow Jesus. I get it now. Everything pales in comparison to helping children know and love Jesus.

There is considerable consternation right now in the American church whether this current generation of youth and children will follow Christ in their young adult years. The National Study of Youth and Religion conducted a landmark research project recently on this issue. What they found is that mothers and fathers who practice what they preach and preach what they practice are the biggest influencers in helping children and youth to follow Christ in their 20s. They found that 82 percent of children raised by parents who talk about faith at home, who attach importance to their beliefs and who are active in church become spiritually active as young adults. Turning your children over to so-called “experts” in the church to inculcate faith through Sunday school, youth group and mission projects won’t cut it. Parents remain the most indispensable shapers of faith in children and youth.
I commend to you, parents in particular, a ministry called Faith Inkubators. This family ministry teaches a simple five minute exercise before bed with children called FAITH 5 (FAITH is an acronym for Faith Acts In The Home). Step 1: share your highs and lows of the day. Step 2: read a verse of scripture. This ministry provides an appropriate list of scriptures or you can utilize ones from our daily devotionals. Step 3: talk about how the highs and lows of the day relate to Scripture. Step 4: pray about your highs and lows. Step 5: bless your children before turning out the lights.

Studies have repeatedly shown that fathers play a vital role in faith development in their children. No surprises here! But what often goes unrecognized is that fathers and mothers parent their children differently.

Kathleen Kline and Bradford Wilcox have coauthored an insightful research book in this area called *Gender and Parenthood* (Wilcox is a sociology professor at the University of Virginia). They identify four areas where fathers parent differently from mothers: vigorous play, taking risks, providing protection and administering discipline.

Some of you may be flying solo as a single parent or a family member in introducing faith to your children. If this is your situation, take heart. It only takes one supportive parent, one grandparent, one aunt or uncle to help a young person embrace Christ and become resilient about life.

Paul concludes his letter to the Ephesians with advice to families called “the household passages.” Paul writes, “Children, obey your parents *in the Lord*” (6:1). Paul then goes on to counsel dads: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (6:4). We could devote an entire sermon to this household passage, but I want you to notice the two prepositional phrases that are marked with italics. Our efforts to obey our parents and instruct our children are centered in little prepositional phrases “*in the Lord*” and “of the Lord.”
Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides much-needed counsel to families in his book *Life Together*. He writes that there are no immediate relationships with anyone in Christian community. Instead, he claims there are only mediated relationships with believers since Christ is our mediator. Jesus Christ is always in-between. He is, quite literally, our go-between. Think of how this concept could revolutionize family relationships if we really leaned into it. Jesus Christ has the potential to mediate every family relationship. If there is someone in your family you’ve had a difficult time loving, let Jesus Christ intervene.

If your heart is not turned toward your children, spouse, parent or family member, ask Jesus Christ to soften your heart. If you’ve had a difficult relationship with someone or a serious falling out with a family member, ask Jesus to be your go-between.