

February 1, 2009
The Lord is Good ...
Psalm 100; Genesis 21:1-7

Psalm 100:5 reads, "*The LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*" It's a wonderful promise. And it's true! How have you experienced that in your life? We can all grump about our problems, but all of us -if we are honest - can see the fingerprints of God on our lives, being good, and faithful, and loving in all sorts of ways ...

Abraham and Sarah certainly experienced God's blessing. Isaac is the baby who should not be. In Genesis 15, God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son. After ten years of being unable to conceive, in desperation Abraham had a child (Ishmael) with Sarah's servant, Hagar. Years went by; both Sarah and Abraham "*were old and well advanced in years and Sarah was past the age of childbearing*" (18:11). Yet Sarah did become pregnant ("*Is anything too hard for the Lord?*" (Genesis 18:14)). And decades after the original promise to Abraham, a child was born!

It was a miracle! Isaac was a special miracle - a special child - the child of a promise or covenant that God had made with Abraham. Isaac would become the father of Jacob (Israel), and ultimately the great-great-great (add many more greats) ancestor of Jesus (Luke 3:23-37). Isaac has a special role to play in the story of God's salvation of all creation.

Every baby is a miracle! We know that intuitively when we see and hold a newborn infant. There is a sense of wonder and awe at the miracle of new life. While medical people may be able to explain all the science behind conception and birth, we sense that there is something more than dispassionate scientific logic and cold, hard biochemistry and genetics underlying the identity, uniqueness, and personality of a baby. We have inklings of God.

Each and every human life is a glorious gift from God. These little ones are important people in our church! They are learning about God as part of our community. Erik Erikson, one of the pioneers of psychosocial development, argues that in the earliest days, a child needs to learn that she can trust her parents and those looking after her. Trust versus mistrust is the critical issue. Our challenge is to create an atmosphere where these little ones learn to trust us - and God.

The wonder of a child

Jesus enjoyed children! Read Mark 10:13-16. In a culture where it was considered a waste of time to spend time with kids, Jesus invited them into His world. In fact He got annoyed with His disciples when they thought He ought to spend His time with "important people" - adults. The disciples tried to shoo the children away.

For Jesus, children were models of the kind of people we ought to be. What is it about kids that Jesus was referring to? What do you think? How does that invite you to reflect on your life? Think about that - we'll come back to it.

Then *"gathering the children up in his arms, he laid his hands of blessing on them"* (Mark 10:16). There is no evidence in Scripture for baptizing infants or young children (the pattern for baptism is that person believes and the in baptized). But here is an example of blessing children.

In our tradition we love to bless children and families. We do services of *"Dedication of Parents and Blessing of Children"* in which we invite the parents to

- rededicate themselves to personal discipleship as followers of Jesus
- seek God's blessing on and wisdom and direction for their home, marriage and parenting
- commit themselves to teaching their child about Jesus and involvement in the church.

We then pray a blessing on the child. The blessing is a prayer for God's grace in the child's life.

It is a very meaningful service for Christian parents as they dedicate themselves to the (challenging) task of living for Christ in their homes, and raising their children in the ways of Jesus. It is also significant for the child as we pray God's blessing on them. And it is important for the whole church community as we commit ourselves to prayer, support, encouragement, and help for the family. It takes a church family to raise a child!

We need to create safe places where kids can try things out. Explore. Learn for themselves. Learn to play and work together. Our challenge is not just to talk the talk of faith and Christian community, but to model the life of Christian community because kids are watching us ...

But children grow up

Every baby is a miracle. But babies grow up. Problems come. One wise person once told us: *"When your kids are small you have lots of problems, but they're little. As they get older, the problems get fewer, but the problems get bigger."* There is some truth to that observation!

Abraham had a problem - Ishmael - his older (and arguably illegitimate) son. How is the problem solved? By trusting in God! (*"Is anything too hard for the Lord?"* [Genesis 18:14]). Note that Abraham has that ongoing personal relationship with God (which would call "prayer") that allows him to express freely to God his concerns, and to hear God's wisdom speaking to him. Our challenge - whatever the issues in our life are - is to keep that two-way communication going.

Think of a person who drives you crazy or someone you may just not like. Once upon a time that person was a miracle of a baby, too! Somehow we change our perspective on people as they age. We no longer see "grown up" people as wonderful, unique creations, blessings from God. We see them as an annoyance, an obstacle, a role (their profession), a burden ... Abraham could have seen Ishmael that way. However Abraham still saw the boy (who was not longer a cute infant) as a precious gift of God. Abraham still cared for him.

Can you see the person who irritates you as still as precious a miracle as a baby? Can you treat others with the same loving care with which you would treat a newborn? It is an interesting way to look at the world ... Pray for that person whom you struggle to love and ask for God's help to

see them as special and treat them well ...

Do I ever see a person or a crowd of people who may be different than I am and mentally write them off? We think: *"They'll never amount to anything"; "Why does she dress like that"; "He needs to get a job"; "Kids these days"; "Parents these days"; "Older people these days!" "People of a certain ethnic group/socio-economic status/ability level these days"; etc., etc.?* How might Jesus see the same person?

Growing Down

Earlier we noted that, for Jesus, children were models of the kind of people we ought to be. What is it about kids that Jesus was referring to? What do you think?

What can we learn from little children? Let's think about children in a healthy home environment, for of course, as God's children, we have the perfect parent!

- Little children don't care if one person is "better" than another or not; they play with anyone.
- Little children do one thing, then move right onto the next; if they don't get praise for their first activity, they don't care - they've moved on. They don't hold grudges if they're not thanked.
- Little children don't need to be talked about or to be the centre of attention.
- Little children enjoy the world with innocence, savouring its freshness.
- Little children have the capacity to wonder at the world, rather than seek recognition and fame.
- Little children are ready to depend on others rather than be full of themselves.
- Little children are joyful much of the time.
- Little children don't hold ethnicity, ability or other issues against other kids.
- Little children don't care about wealth, power, or prestige.
- Little children have the capacity to trust in their parents, rather than thinking it is all up to them.
- Little children don't just talk about doing things, they do them.
- Little children are willing to try new experiences.

This is radically countercultural! We live in a culture that evaluates people in terms of power, prestige, wealth and beauty. Little children don't care about these things - neither should we! We are to "play with anyone" and not even begin to think about who is better or who is best! We are to live life to the fullest, trusting in our heavenly Father, doing one thing, then the next, whether we get any recognition or not!

Gathering together

This morning we are invited to the family table - the table of our Lord. We are invited to come as God's children - if we believe in Jesus as our Saviour and love Him as our Lord, that is who we are: *"to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become*

children of God" (John 1:12).

It is a time of joy and celebration. Family gathering always are (well, should be!)

It is also a time for reconnecting. Sometimes - unintentionally - we lose touch with one another, and we lose touch with the Lord. This is a time to reconnect with God. And it is a time to reconnect with our brothers and sisters

It is a time of recommitment. When you are together as family, you take on an identity as a family. Blood is thicker than water. We are bound together by the shed blood of Jesus - blood which gives us forgiveness of sins, and new life as the children of God.

In our services of *"Dedication of Parents and Blessing of Children"* we ask parents these questions:

- Do you reaffirm your own faith in Jesus, believing in Him as your personal Saviour and seeking to follow Him as Lord of your lives?
- Recognising the dignity and responsibility of parenthood, do you now present your child before God, seeking His blessing and guidance for his life? Do you reaffirm your desire to strive, to the best of your ability, to create a Christian home where Jesus is loved and His principles followed?
- Do you recognize you and declare your dependence upon Almighty God for the wisdom, strength, and blessing you will need to guide and nurture your child?
- Do you promise to share with your child the wonderful love of Jesus, and seek to teach her the ways of God?

Can we affirm those questions ourselves?

- Do you reaffirm your own faith in Jesus, believing in Him as your personal Saviour and seeking to follow Him as Lord of your life?
- Do you reaffirm your desire to strive, to the best of your ability, to create a Christian home - whether you are single, married, with kids, without - where Jesus is loved and His principles followed?
- Do you recognize you and declare your dependence upon Almighty God for the wisdom, strength, and blessing you will need to live wisely and well?
- As you have opportunity, will you share the wonderful love of Jesus, and seek to teach others the ways of God?

"The LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." Celebrate His love!

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