

May 10, 2009
For Example ...
Genesis 29-31

While driving down Highway 2 recently, I wondered, *"How does a young deer know when it is safe to cross a highway? Deer cannot talk. How does wisdom pass down generation to generation?"* Perhaps some of you know! Is it built into their genetic code? Do they have secret "Highway Crossing 101" classes we don't know about? Or is it something they learn by example? Example is a powerful teacher!

- Genesis 25:27-28: *"Isaac ...loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob."* What is Jacob learning?
- Genesis 26: Isaac had gone down to Gerar, in the land of the Philistines. *"When the men of that place asked him about his wife, Rebekah, he said, 'She is my sister,' because he was afraid to say, 'She is my wife.' He thought, 'The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful.' Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, 'She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?' Isaac answered, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her."* What is Jacob learning?

Is it any surprise then that *"Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. He said to Jacob, 'Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I'm famished!' Jacob replied, 'First sell me your birthright.' 'Look, I am about to die,' Esau said. 'What good is the birthright to me?' But Jacob said, 'Swear to me first.' So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob"* (Genesis 25: 29-33)? Is it any surprise that in Genesis 27 we read about Jacob stealing Esau's blessing from Isaac?

What is the pattern that is emerging?

Jacob has learned from his father, who in turn had learned from his father, Abraham, that you play favourites, lie, and try to cheat your way through life (Abraham had tried to pass his wife off as his sister to Abimelech, years earlier). The influence that parents have - for good or for bad - on their children is incredible! Parents are THE most important influence in a child's life. And the lessons they learn profoundly shape them as they grow.

In 1865, William Ross Wallace wrote, *"The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world."* There is a lot of truth here about maternal influence. But it is not just the influence of Mom that shapes a child. It's also the influence of Dad, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends ...

What our children learn from us when things go badly

"Each day of our lives we make deposits in the memory banks of our children," writes Charles Swindoll. The challenge of course, is what deposits we are making ...

When life goes poorly for us, how do we react? Why? What are our children learning about our Christian faith through these difficult times? Jacob has been learning that, in hard times, you cheat, lie, and steal. What is your family learning?

Part of our challenge is that we have been exposed to the myth that, if we are Christians, we will live a charmed life. This is rarely the case. Adversity does happen. Problems do come. Historically and in other countries, Christians have been much better prepared for these times contemporary North American believers. Many Christian traditions expect suffering and struggle - and, while they do not seek it out, they see it as (1) a time to identify with Jesus who suffered, and (2) an opportunity to refine their faith on the forge of hard times. We see it as a curse; they see it as a blessing.

Ignatius Loyola, founder of a missionary order, failed with at least two sets of companions. His first followers were strong on enthusiasm, and made the right spiritual noises; but they fell away when Ignatius was arraigned by the Inquisition, imprisoned, and humiliated. While Ignatius could see this experience as sharing in the suffering of Christ, the young men who admired him felt something had gone wrong. Ignatius saw his experiences as character building - he was growing stronger in his faith and deeper in his appreciation of what Jesus had suffered for His people.

My experience is that most people live with pain - health, family, work, emotions, school, past events. A faith that avoids suffering or offers miraculous cures is not helpful. A determined faithfulness to Jesus, a stubborn faith that sees hope and grace in pain, a teachable spirit that allows the difficult times to refine my faith is a helpful model.

Earlier this year we quoted Dallas Willard who observed that "*We always live up to our beliefs, not necessarily what we profess to believe.*" Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor executed by the Nazis, wrote, "*Sometimes we don't need another chance to express how we feel or to ask someone to understand our situation. Sometimes we just need a firm kick in the pants. An unsmiling expectation that if we mean all these wonderful things we talk about and sing about, then let's see something to prove it.*"

What our children learn from us when things go well

What may be even more challenging to reflect on is what our children learn when things go well. The challenge for most North Americans (especially Albertans) over the past decade is that life has been pretty good (economically anyway). And when times are good we tend to feel secure. When we feel secure, we tend to forget about or ignore God. We have no need of Him - so why bother? In good times, God often ceases to be a meaningful part of our lives.

Jacob's life - thanks to his trickery - is moving along pretty well. He has two wives lots of children, and lots of livestock (in those days all signs of a wealthy man). He seems to be healthy. Life is good! And what are his children learning about God? Nothing. God is not a part of Jacob's life. God simply doesn't figure into Jacob's life at all.

Jacob had made this vow: *"If God will be with me and will watch over me on this journey I am taking and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear so that I return safely to my father's house, then the LORD will be my God and this stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God's house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth"* (Genesis 28:20-22). It's a foolish vow - first because Jacob is trying to set the ground rules for his relationship with God (if God does certain things, Jacob will do him the favour of believing in Him), and secondly because Jacob makes no attempt to fulfill his part of the vow, despite his blessings from God. How many of us do the same? At some point we make promises to God - *"If only He'll help me, then ..."* - but we never follow through on them? Our problems are solved, so we just move on and forget God.

The challenge in the good times is to cultivate a climate of

- Thanksgiving - sometimes life is good - be a thankful person! And be honest and up front with whom you are thankful, too!
- Humility - resist the temptation to say "I deserve it" or "I earned it." If life is good, God is being gracious - to Him be the glory. Things can change pretty quickly ...
- Generosity - if God is more than meeting your needs, give generously to help others.
- Compassion - as you enjoy the wonderful blessings of God, use that as a source of encouragement, support, and love, to graciously bless others.
- Godliness - live with integrity before the Lord and other people.

What our children learn from us about ethics

"Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them" (James Baldwin). Jacob learned deceit from his father Isaac, who learned it from his father, Abraham. Jacob's sons will learn it from him.

What do our children learn from us about ethics ... Integrity? Morality? Love?

At a recent community forum on affordable housing, several people commented that our city is becoming less tolerant of people in poverty and ethnic minorities. The word that was used to describe our community's need is "civil." We need to be a more "civil" society - that is we need a society where citizens respect and honour one another as equals, as worthy of respect. What does it mean for us, as the people of God to be God's "civil society" - to be citizens of the Kingdom of God? How does that influence how we live?

"Few things are more infectious than a godly lifestyle. The people you rub shoulders with everyday need that kind of challenge. Not prudish. Not preachy. Just Cracker Jack clean living. Just honest to goodness, bone-deep, non-hypocritical integrity." (Charles Swindoll)

What our children learn from us about faith

Running in the background of these specific examples (what do our kids learn from us during hard/good times and about ethics) is the bigger issue: what do our children learn from us about faith? About God? About Jesus? Maya Angelou, outspoken author and political activist, writes,

"Of all the needs a lonely child has, the one that must be satisfied, if there is going to be hope and a hope of wholeness, is the unshaken need for an unshakable God."

The primary place where children learn about faith is at home. They learn it from Mom, Dad, grandparents, aunts and uncles ... Neither the church, nor camp, nor Christian school has nearly the influence that close relatives and friends have on the spiritual development of children.

We're used to outsourcing children: we send them out to music lessons, to sports activities, to learn reading, writing and arithmetic ... so why not expect that church can teach them about God, 1 hour per week (and 5 days each summer at camp)?

The challenge is that loving God is not something you learn, intellectually, like algebra. A personal relationship with Jesus is not a skill you learn, like playing the tuba. Christian faith is something you learn by living it - by following Jesus' example and principles in all the varied circumstances of life. It is more "caught" - as people observe us trying to live our faith - that "taught" in a formal classroom setting.

The power of example - of teachable moments - of missional moments - is profound. Deer learn, by example, when it is safe to cross the road. We will learn more by example than any other way, too. And so do our children (grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc).

Paul gives us this wisdom: *"Imitate God in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us"* (Ephesians 5:1-4). We are to follow Jesus' example, then ...

1 Timothy 4:12: *"Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity."* We are to live as living examples of faithfulness to Jesus.

"We do not segment our lives, giving some time to God, some to our business or schooling, while keeping parts to ourselves. The idea is to live all of our lives in the presence of God, under the authority of God, and for the honor and glory of God. That is what the Christian life is all about" (R. C. Sproul). This is the lesson Jacob has yet to learn.

"No one can sum up all God is able to accomplish through one solitary life, wholly yielded, adjusted, and obedient to Him" wrote D.L. Moody. The greatest accomplishment any of us can attain is living that kind of life. What does it mean for you to lead a life, wholly yielded, adjusted and obedient to God? Who knows what God can accomplish through it?

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