

## Father Knows Best

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Stephen DeGweck on Sunday, July 25, 2010 and is based on Luke 11:1-13.

*"If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" --Luke 11:13*

A government study done about ten years ago left me shaking my head. It found that 88% of adults believe it is harder to be a parent today than in the past. "What was painfully clear," says the commission's chairman, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, "was that families are really trying, but it's increasingly hard for them to make ends meet and spend time with their children." That's not the head-shaking part, but it gets worse. According to this study, 87% of parents reported some financial difficulties, 81% said they believed they weren't spending enough time with their kids, and 33% were of the opinion that kids in general received less care and attention than they had even 10 years before.

The comments were still more disturbing from those in single-parent homes. Not only were the average financial burdens heavier, but according to this same study, "20% of children from single parent homes nationwide hadn't seen their father in five years." That's shocking. It's a tough world out there. Even in the best of homes raising children is a challenge. Even if the marriage is intact. Even if finances are not a major concern. Even if parents have time to spend with their children, challenges abound. Let's face it – being a parent is tough! What are some of the reasons?

FOR ONE THING, THERE IS A FINE LINE BETWEEN PROVIDING FOR A CHILD AND SPOILING THE CHILD. Anyone relate to that? There is a fine line between providing for and spoiling -- and it doesn't just relate to toys. How tough or how tender should we be with our kids? Does anyone have an answer for that one? Most of us would agree that we used to think we had lots of answers -- and then we had kids!

A burst of thunder sent a four-year old flying into her parent's bedroom. "Mommy, I'm scared," she said. Mother, half awake and half unconscious, replied, "Go back to your room. God will be there with you." As the tiny figure stood in the unlit doorway for a moment, another clap of thunder was heard. "Mommy," she said, "How about if I sleep here with Daddy and you go in there and sleep with God?" It's tough the first night we make a child sleep alone in her own room. Or send them off to school for the first time, or off to camp, or even off to college. It never gets easier, does it? It's hard to sleep when you know your child is frightened or lonesome or struggling. Yet hopefully you know for the child's own good this is a transition she must make. Childhood doesn't last forever. John Croyle says that the moment that sweet little bundle opens his or her eyes and looks up at you, a suitcase pops open in their chests. It's your job to start packing it, to make them fit for the day they'll wave goodbye and drive off. There is a fine line between providing for a child's needs and spoiling that child.

THERE IS ALSO A FINE LINE BETWEEN GENUINELY ASSISTING YOUR CHILD AND PREVENTING THAT CHILD FROM LEARNING TO TAKE ON RESPONSIBILITY. Can anyone really disagree with that? We

know that learning a sense of responsibility is one of the essential tasks of childhood. But again, that's hard. There's that fine line between dependence and independence. Between freedom and responsibility. How much should I do for my child? How much should he or she do for himself or herself? Sometimes parents rob their children of developing a sense of responsibility because it is easier to go ahead and perform a task for them than it is to get them to do it themselves. It is easier to give in than it is to set firm guidelines.

I don't want to seem judgmental, but from my vast experience of being married to a teacher for many years, my guess is that in today's world there are at least as many problem parents as there are problem kids. I read that several years ago in St. Louis they had to cancel the annual city-wide Easter egg hunt in that city, and guess why? It was because the parents were getting out of hand. The kids were fine. If you don't believe that can happen, visit any Little League ballpark. It's hard, but we can sympathize. Where do you draw the line in teaching a child responsibility, to take up for themselves, to be independent, yet to care for others? Sometimes it takes the wisdom of Solomon.

FINALLY, (and I know this was the hardest part of raising kids for me) THERE IS THE DIFFICULTY OF HAVING TO WATCH YOUR CHILD SUFFER ADVERSITY AND NOT LEAP TO THE RESCUE. None of us want to see our children hurt. Protecting them is the sharpest instinct we have. We don't like to see them fall down and bruise their knees. We don't like for them to have to receive hurtful remarks from other children. We would do almost anything to keep them from experiencing pain. Let me suffer, Lord, we say to ourselves, but not him. Not her. It reminds me of the classic story told about the legendary pro football great, Sid Luckman, and his father. For those of you without gray hair, Luckman was a star quarterback when the NFL was in its infancy. He played for the Chicago Bears, who dominated pro football in the 1930's and 40's. Luckman's father was a Jewish immigrant, a tailor in Brooklyn. He knew little about football and rarely got to see his son play. This of course is long before TV. However, one Sunday the Bears were in New York to play the Giants at the Polo Grounds, and Luckman arranged for his parents to have seats on the 50-yard line. For most of the first quarter, things went smoothly. Luckman was completing pass after pass, and the running game was working well. But then in the second quarter, the Bears' pass protection began to break down and Luckman had to scramble, play after play, running for his life. Later, Luckman's mother told her son that up in the stands his father, not fully understanding what was going on, had been yelling, "Sidney, let them have the ball. I'll buy you another one."

We want to protect our children not only from stampeding linebackers but from emotional hurts as well. And yet haven't we learned, most of us, that where there is no hurt, there is finally no growth. If there is no adversity, there is no strength. If there is no pain, there is precious little sensitivity. If you learn to roller skate, you're going to fall. If you learn to deal with people, you've got to learn to deal with criticism and sarcasm and demeaning behavior. We can't forever protect or shelter our children from life's darker side. We can do our best to keep them safe, and we should, but there comes a time when, for the child's own good, we have to step back and let go, even if it means a scraped knee or a bruised ego or a sleepless night.

OK, Steve, this isn't Mother's Day or Father's Day. Where's this all going? Right here. THERE IS A REAL SENSE IN WHICH GOD HAS THE SAME DILEMMA WITH US. Fortunately, he's smarter. Jesus, speaking to parents, says in Luke's account, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly

Father give the Holy Spirit to those who trust him." In all of Jesus' words and teaching, the most fundamental picture of God that he gives us is that of a loving parent. He says, "When you pray, say 'Abba, Father.'" That's the equivalent of your little girl or boy crawling into your lap and saying "Papa" or "Daddy." God's not far away, says Jesus. He knows our real needs. He will grant us anything in this world that is in our best interest. But he knows what those best interests are, and we don't always. He knows what will make us stronger and what will ultimately destroy us. He knows what will draw us towards him, and he knows what is most likely to make us drift away. In a nutshell, He knows what it will take to make us fit for His Kingdom. That's what Jesus means when he says "Ask whatever you want and you will have it." Ask in my name, he says, in other words, ask in the spirit of Jesus and in the way that Jesus himself would ask. God will give us anything that will make us better people and more fit for his kingdom. A better bank balance is a good thing. I suspect that lots of you have been praying for one. I hope you get it. But it won't make you more fit for the kingdom of God. It won't draw you closer to Christ. Pray in my name, says Jesus. Ask for the things that honor me.

And just as we sometimes have to allow our children to fall down, that they might get up stronger and wiser, so it is with God. Sometimes the greatest gift of God is an unanswered prayer, because He sees what we can't see. It pains Him to see us hurt, just as it pains us to see our children hurt, even more. Like I said, He knows what is in our best interest. I wish I could say that we always do, too. But that would be a lie.

A story in *Christian Worker's* magazine tells about a young man who was trying to establish himself as a peach grower. He had worked hard and invested everything he had in a peach orchard which blossomed wonderfully --until a frost came and killed all the blossoms. The young fellow did not go to church that next Sunday, or the next, or the next. Finally his pastor went to see him to see what was up. The young man exclaimed with bitterness, "I'm never coming again. How can I can worship a God who cares so little for me that he would let a frost kill all my peaches, and ruin me?" The old minister looked at him a few moments in silence, and then said kindly, "God loves you better than He does your peaches. He knows that while peaches do better without frosts, it is impossible to grow the best people without some adversity. His object is to grow people, not peaches." There is a lot of sound theology there. God's intent is not to grow peaches. It is to grow people -- people whose hearts, minds and souls are fit to share eternity with Him. And He knows that it is at the broken places that we become strongest. It is in leaning on him in times of weakness that we discover real strength. I don't mean to be simplistic, and I'm certainly not implying that God sends suffering capriciously, just to shape us up a bit. I don't mean that at all. When one of you comes to me, teary-eyed, and asks "How could God let this or that happen?" my first response is usually, "I don't know." You see, I trust God. Even when that trust is a choice. Even when the evidence isn't running in God's favor at the moment. A lifetime of experience has taught me that. God does not cause suffering. He just works quietly and furiously within it. Good can always come. I believe that. Sometimes it just takes a while for us to see it.

Our text, then, is about trust. It is about letting go of our resentments, our doubts, and our fears. It is about believing that there is never a storm so tumultuous that He cannot bring us safely through. It's about trusting that there is no night so dark that His light cannot penetrate it, and that nothing is going to happen to us that by His grace we cannot ultimately handle. If we then, imperfect stumblers that we are, know how to give good things to our children, perhaps we can begin to trust God, knowing that some days the skies will be dark, most days will be bright, and a few will be plain awful, but that in all of them –

good, bad, and in between - a loving heavenly father will be working to provide us with every good thing we need. Amen.