

## A Parenting Reflection: “Do You Love Me?”

In the process of baptismal preparation I always try to develop a relationship with both parents. I was delighted recently to speak to a new dad on the phone who had taken paternity leave along with his wife. He sounded like a new exhausted new mom to me! Today many fathers are assuming the role of primary care giver for their children. No doubt we all have a friend, neighbor or relative acting this out. We have experienced the richness of this in our own congregation.

How good it is that this child will have intentional nurturing and bonding with both parents. Both of them will be shaping for their child her own image or perception of God long before she has been exposed to any formal teaching on the nature of God. The love, the trust, the faith, and the hope instilled through daily living and an intimate relationship will be the roots from where her spiritual life will grow. This will be watered in baptism and ideally it will be nurtured with intentional care by the church - within a caring Christian community.

The thought of shaping their child's image of God can be fairly awesome to most parents - it certainly was for me some thirty years ago when I first heard of studies being done at a religious counseling center in New York in which adults who had had an especially abusive relationship with their father were literally unable to pray the Lord's Prayer using the words "Our Father" in referring to God. This is not a 21st century phenomenon but has probably acted itself out in human history from the beginning of time. It could be part of any one of our own stories to a lesser or greater degree.

In a small way it stuck there in my mind one hot and sultry evening as I was giving my young children a bath in the freshly cleaned bathroom over with which I had labored that afternoon. They were old enough to care for themselves, but still young enough to create havoc when mother's watchful eye was tending a detail around the corner. Being tired from the day's work and feeling heavily laden with the third child almost due, I heard exuberant splashing and wild shenanigans going on in the tub - I had reached my limit and came storming around the corner with a vengeance of words that literally created holy terror in this playful duo.

Apparently I didn't realize my own power and ability to terrorize anything - let alone my own children. So without a thought I returned to my chores only to hear a meek little voice call forth, "Mo-th-er, Mo-th-er, come here." . . . There I stood by the tub with two shivering little girls, cowering in the corner - as if naked and ashamed in the Garden of Eden. The older one became the tearful spokes person as she stammered out their heartfelt question, "Mother, do you still love us?"

Well. I nearly melted on the spot. The first time my children had ever expressed doubt or question about my love for them. I found myself quietly praying for the right response - thinking I might destroy their faith forever if I botched this one. I remembered the expression, "God loves the sinner but hates the sin," and quickly began translating that into a child's world of reality.

I leaned over and embraced each of these soggy wet souls and reassured them that no matter what they had done I would always love them . . . but it certainly did make me angry when they

messed up my freshly cleaned bathroom. I would learn some ten years later at a parenting seminar, those magic words, "I love you for who you are, but don't necessarily like what you do."

Years have passed and we now know for a fact something of what was being surmised at the time. Young children really do see their parents as God figures - its still awesome and overwhelming when I think of it.

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