

Leading Children Towards a Life with God

I'm a worrier by nature. You can ask my wife. I'm sure she can make a whole list of silly things I worry about. I haven't always been like this, at least I don't think so, but getting married added a little to my worrisome nature. I'd still say it wasn't terrible. Becoming a dad, by way of adoption, to our son Mason definitely added more worry. Then, if that wasn't enough, finding out my wife was pregnant and finding out that we were expecting a daughter, off the charts. I am guessing some of you have similar experiences. When children enter the picture, things change. I'd like to tell you about an article that has helped me worry less.

Reggie Joiner wrote an article in the wake of the devastating Sandy Hook Elementary School Shootings in Newtown, Connecticut where the lives of 20 six and seven year olds and various adult staff were taken. He shared a lot of good perspective but it was the sentence he used to tie everything together that impacted me in a very profound way. He said:

“Call me an optimist, but I happen to believe the first second in eternity will immediately erase the worst that evil can do in a lifetime.”

-Reggie Joiner

After writing that article, Reggie's daughter, Hannah Joiner, painted this picture. If you look closely there are the names of the 20 children hidden in the bottom of the painting. The painting depicts the children being led into eternity by one of the teachers who gave her life trying to save them.

I now spend less time worrying and more time thinking about how to get my children to that first second, their first second in eternity. I pray their first second, whenever it is, will be followed by many more in fellowship with God because of their acceptance of what Jesus has done for them. We often fear and worry about worst case scenarios like the the Sandy Hook shootings, yet, even in the absence of tragedy our children all have an eternal destination. The stakes are high.

The question I want to pose today is, “What is our role, as a church, in helping children arrive at that first second with a healthy knowledge and understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for them?” We're going to look at the context that this happens in, the vision for who we need to be and the strategy that we have adopted here at Faith.

I want to first talk about the context in which we lead children to God. If you've become a Christian you have joined a new family. In Mark 3 Jesus is teaching to a crowd. While teaching, Mary, His mother, and His brothers show up outside. Instead of forcing their way through the crowd they send for Jesus asking that He would come to them. When Jesus didn't get up the crowd around Him reminded, “Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You.”

33 Answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" 34 Looking about at those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! 35 For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Mark 3:33-35

If you're a follower of Christ you are part of a family. The question we must then ask ourselves is, "Are we functioning as a family?" If we're going to help our children experience God we need to be a healthy family that pays attention to the smallest among us.

As a family, we're going to be looking at Deuteronomy 6:4-9. This passage will give us the vision for who God wants us to be in the process of leading children to Himself. It's a familiar passage for many of you. Deuteronomy is a collection of teachings from Moses to Israel shortly before his death. Israel is poised to enter the promised land and the book is full of reminders about where they've been, including the mistakes they made, as well as a clear, God honoring, path forward.

4 "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!

Deuteronomy 6:4

We need to understand who God is. Verse 4 is reminding Israel that their God is the only God. Israel was getting ready to enter the land of Canaan where the inhabitants worshiped multiple Gods. Moses was taking extra care to remind them of who they worshipped, the one true God. This is in direct response to the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me."

5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.

Deuteronomy 6:5-6

We can't lead children to something we don't personally have, a genuine deep love for God is critical. We can grow our love for God by spending time learning from the bible. I'll be the first to admit, I struggle with regular bible study. If you find reading the bible is challenging for you too, here are some ideas that have helped me.

- You can listen to the bible, there are several free resources online if you are an auditory learner and learn best by hearing.
- You can learn about different ways to read the bible. Rick Warren's Bible Study Methods is a tool that is helpful to me.
- You can join a life group here at Faith. Interacting over the Bible in community is a great way to experience God's Word.

If are going to have a faith that we want our children to have we need to love and treasure God's word in our hearts.

Our love for God can also be grown by remembering what He has done. Many of you know the story our struggles with infertility and adoption of our son Mason. Looking back and seeing God's graciousness to us throughout the difficult trials and amazing blessings of those years has grown my love for Him.

This might be a good time to mention that I am mindful that talking about children might not be easy for everyone here. Some of you want children desperately but God seems to be withholding that blessing. Others might have grown children who have left their faith causing you wonder if it was something you did our didn't do. My encouragement is this, even in the midst of difficult seasons, where what we want most seems to be out of reach, the story of Jesus living and dying for us can kindle in our hearts a deep love for God.

7 You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:7-9

Moses is telling Israel that there needs to be great intentionality in passing faith on to younger generations. We need to keep God in the forefront of our lives for children to see. Throughout our day we are constantly interacting with God's amazing creation, experiencing his generous provision and being led by the Holy Spirit. When children see us engaging God and giving Him credit for every good thing, they too will be more inclined to see His finger prints on all that they encounter.

If you are not currently and actively engaged in the day to day work of parenting you might check out when this passage starts talking about sons, thinking this passage doesn't apply to you. Meredith Miller in an article she wrote for the Fuller Youth Institute about family ministry shares an important insight. She writes:

Certain "family" passages in Scripture are describing a dynamic that is not necessarily the same as the nuclear family, but a lack of attention to cultural context has led us to read our own Western understanding of family into the text. A family in the Old Testament would have included parents, children, workers, perhaps adult siblings with their own spouses and children. In fact, households could be compiled of as many as 80 people. These texts, such as Deuteronomy 6, are discussing the communal raising of children. Our own cultural distance from these passages may cause us to put undue pressure on parents alone.

-Meredith Miller, Family Ministry

In light of how the Israelites would have understood Deuteronomy, we need to be able to look past the four walls of our own homes. Parents will always be the greatest influence on their children but if we, as their extended family, won't come along side of them our children will be missing so much of what the church has to offer.

Finally, I want to talk about our strategy, here at Faith, for leading children to Christ. There are two primary spiritual influences in the life of a child. A child's immediate family is the first influence giving a love that only they can give to a child. The second influence is the church whose job is to shine a light on God so that He can be seen clearly. As a church, we've adopted the idea of "Thinking Orange." We represent the love of the family with the color red and the light of the church with the color yellow. Red plus yellow equals orange right? Thinking Orange is the combination of those two influences and can be summarized:

"Two combined influences make a greater impact than just two influences."

-Reggie Joiner, Think Orange

If we synchronize what we're doing in the church and in the home our chances of instilling a lasting faith are greater. Today, we're focused on the yellow side of the equation, how we, the church family, can informally and formally lead our children to Jesus.

Leading our children to God will require others in our church family. I refer to this as a second voice. It is informal and happens in the day to day routines of life. There are some things that children don't want to and won't talk about with their parents. Nearly every child will reach a point when they need a second voice. As a church, we need to be available to be that second voice, if we're not, they'll find it somewhere else.

Our son is two and our daughter will literally be born any day now. They're very young but we believe that this idea of having other adults in our children's lives is so important that we've already identified who we hope those people will be. We meet together with them and are intentional about having shared experiences. One day when it's obvious I'm not getting the whole truth from one of my kids my hope is that they would have relationships with other adults, who are safe people for them, that will give them the same guidance I myself would give. If we wait until our children really need that second voice to try and establish those kinds of relationships we missed our window of opportunity. We need to be available to be that second voice.

Our programs are how we formally seek to fulfill the yellow side of the orange equation. You would not have too look hard to see that Faith values our children and youth. We have dedicated pastors for both, our budgets for them are sizable, and we have full access to our elders for guidance and support. In addition to these resources, the one resource that we absolutely cannot live without is you.

Throughout this morning, sixty people, will lend their time, energy and voice to pull off our typical Sunday morning routine. In my eyes they are rock-stars, they make it happen. Our attendance has significantly grown over the past several years. Currently over 200 children call Faith their home church. Due to this growth we sense God leading us to create a second Sunday School hour, it will likely happen this fall. (9:30 service only, With that change, we will be asking some of you to make the switch to the 11:00 service). This structure change will lead to a need for an additional thirty volunteers to operate at the level we feel would reflect God well to our children. That's 50% more volunteers than we currently have.

Trying to wrap my mind around what it will take to staff that program is definitely taking a lot of personal faith. It will take people in all stages of life to carry the load of that burden. Many of you already know where this is headed and there is a good chance some of you are already thinking of the reasons why God would not even think about asking YOU to volunteer. Maybe you have a crazy course load, maybe church is your one chance for a break from children, life might simply be too busy, etc. etc. It's easy to find a way out.

Students and young adults I'm excited that you're here. You represent some of the best volunteers we've had over the life of the church. You have a youthful energy and flexibility that all of us past the age of 25 can barely remember. You bring so much LIFE to the children's wing. What better way to make your time here in Manhattan count. My prayer is that you can enter into our family here at Faith and leave a piece of your spiritual legacy with us when God takes you to your next destination.

Parents, I know the stage of life you're in, I'm there with you. Working with children may be the last thing you want to do on Sunday mornings. I don't know about your children but we turn our back on Mason for 60 seconds and he can manage to mop 500 square feet of wood floor with toilet water and a wash rag... Seriously, he can, if he comes to visit your house lock your bathrooms. Many nights Amy and I are both silently hoping that the other will volunteer to take care of the bedtime routine, parenting is exhausting. Yet, no one will ever care about the spiritual journey of your children as much as you do. Because of that, you can bring a dynamic that no one else can replicate.

Empty nesters, you guys have put your time in with kids and you've done it well. There are so many young adults who grew up in this church and are flourishing in their faith as a result of your investments in them. Your efforts have borne good fruit. Job well done, you're off the hook. You know I don't really mean that. You have wisdom that our children desperately need. My generation needs to see how you've done all that you've accomplished. Come show us, we're eager to learn.

If you don't find yourself in any of the groups I've just mentioned I haven't forgot about you. Every person in this room has been given unique gifts. Those gifts can be used in so many ways in the context of working with kids. Some volunteers will find themselves in the proverbial trenches, pouring their lives into children. Some will have the honor of holding those volunteers up with various forms of encouragement and support. Others,

might be tasked with making sure our environments stay safe. There is all kinds of work to be done.

Serving children can be hard work. From dirty diapers to discipline it takes a lot of time and mental fortitude to serve children. There are days I walk away from Sunday mornings wondering what just happened! If this is your first time volunteering, you will need to go through an interview and background check process before you even get the chance to work with children. If we're to take this idea of being part of a new family seriously all of us need to ask, "What about me God?" Should I be doing something? If you're already serving one or twice a month what about asking, "God, do you want me to take on a bigger role?"

Children's ministry is often a place where people give and give and give and give. In return, after nine months, they get a plate of cookies. At the end of a volunteer term you can often watch the last child leave a classroom and see a volunteer take a deep sigh of relief. We want something very different than that. We're expanding the children's ministry leadership team from three positions to ten. Several high capacity leaders have signed on and several more are praying about it. When that team comes together we're going to devote ourselves to moving our children's ministries away from something you simply do, to a place where you can belong. A place that honors you for the commitment that it takes to serve children. A place that is mindful of every person from the youngest child to the most seasoned volunteer.

I'm not naive, I know everyone sitting in here won't sign up to serve but I would like you all to consider what it might look like for you to serve the children here at Faith. If you are interested in learning more or feel like God is asking you to be a part of what we're doing I'd like to draw your attention to the communication card in the back of the chair in front of you. This is your way to say, "I'm in!" As you look at the check boxes on the back of the card, mark all that apply. We will do our best to get in touch with you as soon as possible, it might take a little time so be patient. If you've already talked with me about serving go ahead and fill this out again, it will be good for us to have everyone interested in one place.

Time is a fascinating thing. It's one resource we can't get more of. As we think about our children, every grain of sand that falls is one that we can't get back. Daily, they experience more and more of what we currently, right now, consider to be their future. Daily, they move closer to eternity. One hundred years from now, the only thing that will matter in the life of a child is their relationship with God. We've been given some amazing children, they impress me every time I get to interact with them. Today, I pray that we would commit ourselves to the context of living as family, the vision of who we need to be in Deuteronomy and the strategy of partnering with parents that our children need to meet Jesus early and then walk with Him at every stage of their lives. I pray a part of our legacy would be reflected in who they become. Though we will still fail at times, by God's grace may we be a community that prepares our children well for their first second in eternity.

20 Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, 21 to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.