

"Making Disciples"

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC
10:55 a.m. Sunday, August 26, 2007

Text: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 II Timothy 3:10-17 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our minds and hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that we may receive your words of truth for us today. Amen.

TEACHING THE BIBLE

Our daughter, Sarah, is now a college freshman. Our son, Andy, is a senior in college. Melody and I helped Sarah, move in at Greensboro College last weekend. I was telling her some things to remember even the day before she left. Last Saturday afternoon we drove away. Now for the first time in over 18 years, she is not living with us any more.

Recently I considered the opportunities, the newness and the temptations of college life. I am well aware that now is the time when all that Melody and I have taught Sarah will either bear fruit or not. Our primary time as teachers is over for the most part.

What an honor and a privilege it is to have children – to teach them about the Lord, to train them to follow Jesus, and to learn from them, too. To teach our children to love God is a crucial task. I think it is the most important thing we can do for our children. It will impact their lives long after they grow up and leave home, even after we have died. It will bless their lives for eternity.

Like every child I know, when I was growing up, I was watching my parents. I

was watching to see if what they did, matched up with what they said. As a child, I remember my parents being pretty amazingly consistent. My father would read the Bible regularly. He did not have a complicated plan for reading the Bible. He started at Genesis and read through the Bible, chapter by chapter. When he arrived at the end of Revelation, he would start over. Some evenings when I would walk to the kitchen to get a glass of water, I would glance in the doorway to his bedroom. Sometimes I would see him kneeling beside his bed. I knew he was praying. He was praying for Mama, and Glen and me, and a host of other things before he went to bed. Often I would see my mother reading the Bible and then *The Upper Room*.

Daddy is no longer living on this earth, but his witness, his effect on my life continues. Parents, now is your chance to teach your children to love God.

The psalmist tells us that God's law rejoices the heart. It enlightens the eyes. It is to be desired more than gold. It is sweeter than honey from the honeycomb. (Psalm 19:7-10)

We presented Bibles to 14 third-grade students this morning. Why did we do that? Because it is such an important book. The Bible tells us who God is. It tells us who we are. It tells us how we are to relate to God and other people. One of the bedrock beliefs of Duke Memorial United Methodist Church states: "The Bible is a source of truth about God, the foundation of our beliefs, and a guide for living."

The apostle Paul wrote his younger helper, Timothy, about the words of scripture. The sacred writings instruct us for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (II Timothy 3:16) When we learn the words of scripture, we are equipped for every good work.

That was the case in the first century, and it has held true ever since.

John Wesley was the founder of the Methodist societies in England 250 years ago. This is what he said about the Bible, "O give me that book! At any price give me

the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me a man of one book." On another occasion, he said, "I sit down alone. Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his books; and what I thus learn, I teach."

That is what I would do with Andy and Sarah. I would learn different principles from the Bible. Then I would teach them. That is what I do in my role as a pastor of this church. I study the Bible. Then, what I learn, I teach you.

HELPFUL PRINCIPLES

To teach our children to love God is a crucial task. Some of you may be thinking, "That is a great idea, but how do I do that?"

My brother, Glen, is the pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church, in Indianapolis, Indiana. In a recent issue of his church newsletter, there was an article titled, "How You as Parents Can Teach Your Children about the Bible." Here are some of the ways the newsletter article listed:

- Be personally involved in reading the Bible and nurture your knowledge of Scripture. If you need a plan for reading the Bible, pick up a copy of *The Upper Room* devotional guide on a table in the lobby of the Center Building. There is a suggested scripture reading for every day.
- Model intentional Bible study and reading for your children. (We have a number of adult Sunday School classes that meet at 9:45 a.m. every Sunday. They are listed on the bulletin insert.)
- Tell Bible stories to your children. Make it a family ritual!

When Andy and Sarah were younger, and living at home, we would have a daily family devotional time in the evenings. When they were children, we would use a couple of Bible story books. When they were very young, we would read the story to them, and then show them the picture that went with the story. Then we would ask them the three or four questions that went with the story. They learned to listen

carefully to the story, so that they could answer the questions. They loved to answer the questions! When they learned how to read, they began taking turns reading the stories.

We used those books so much they we almost wore them out. We had to repair and tape the spine of one of the books. Because of those family devotions, we learned what was in the Bible. We learned who God is. We learned how to live as Jesus' disciples.

Even though I really like books, if our children were young today, we might use a computer program to engage them.

Other ways that parents can teach their children about the Bible:

- Use biblical examples to demonstrate choices about values in everyday life. If Moses did thus and so, or the Good Samaritan did this, or the boy with the lunch among thousands of hungry people did this, then what am I to do when faced with a similar situation?
- Share your favorite scripture verses with your children and tell them why these are meaningful to you. If you don't know any scripture verses, start reading the Bible every day!
- Talk to your child's Sunday School teacher. Find out what is being taught, so you can follow up with discussion at home. Many of the classes have a take home page that can stimulate such discussion.
- Be open to questions children have as they wonder about faith. Be willing to help them seek understanding.
- Provide your child with an age-appropriate Bible and spend time with them reading it.
- Pray to God for guidance as you strive to nurture your children in the faith.

In the book of Deuteronomy, we read these words, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with

all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5) In Jewish tradition these verses are the beginning of an important prayer known as the *Shema*, from the Hebrew word, “hear.” This gets at the heart of the first commandment. We are to love God totally.

Then we read, “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” (Deut. 6:6-7) The clear implication is that we are to always talk about the commandments. Loving God is to become a part of our everyday lives.

How do we do this? This is the instruction for the ancient Hebrew people: “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut. 6:8-9)

The Hebrew people would prepare leather pouches called *phylacteries*. They would place the *Shema* or another portion of the law in the *phylacteries*. They would then tie the *phylacteries* around their forehead or on their wrist as an obvious, everpresent reminder to love God totally and to put God first.

They would also place a portion of the law in a small, cylindrical box called a *mezuzah*. They would attach the *mezuzah* on the upper portion of their right doorpost. Every time they would enter or leave their home, they would be reminded of the command to love God.

Today in the year 2007 what can we use as reminders to love God and to teach our children to love God? One idea is a prayer card. This card is titled, “31 Biblical Virtues to Pray for Your Kids.” There is a different biblical virtue to pray for your children every day of the month. I have placed 50 of these cards on a table in the lobby of the Center Building.

You could use a key chain with your car keys or house keys. For years while Andy and Sarah were growing up, I used a key chain with a wooden piece that was inscribed with these words, “Dad . . . Wise teacher . . . “No greater joy . . . my children

walk in truth.” -- III John 4” Every time I would start my car, I would have a chance to be reminded of my responsibility as a father.

Another reminder to love God could be a card in a photograph on your chest of drawers. Or a card on a refrigerator door. It could be as simple as, “Love God first. Teach Andy and Sarah.” You could tape a card to the bathroom mirror where you shave in the morning. Be creative.

An important way that parents can teach their children to love God is to partner with Sunday School classes and other spiritual formation opportunities at our church. We live in a culture that is materialistic, me-centered, information-saturated, and high-tech. In the midst of this culture, I believe that living as a Christian is the very best way to live. Our church seeks to teach children, youth and adults how to live that way. We seek to present material that is biblical. Biblical truth is worth more than gold or honey. We seek to present material that is relevant to the challenges of life in the 21st century. We also see to present material in a way that is engaging – that engages our imaginations, our hearts and our wills.

160 years ago Henry Ware authored a hymn titled, “Happy the Home When God is There.” Its important message is just as relevant today. He writes that a home is happy when children learn about Jesus at an early age and when parents honor Jesus. A home is happy when there is prayer, when family members praise and thank God, when parents prize the wisdom of the Bible.

MODELING THE FAITH

To teach our children to love God is a crucial task. An important part of teaching is modeling. We model our faith. We live it. This is our chance to teach these precious children and youth – as parents and as a church. This is our chance.

When I was growing up as a young child, my family and I lived about a mile from our church, Hawthorne Lane United Methodist Church, in Charlotte. On nice Sunday

mornings in the spring and fall, Daddy, Glen and I would walk to Sunday School after breakfast. We never knew what Mama was doing back at home – either cleaning up or working on lunch preparations or fixing her hair. It always seemed like about the time we would arrive at the church, Mama would drive up in the parking lot.

How I loved those walks with Daddy and Glen! For Daddy, who was a teacher in the 1st and 2nd grade Sunday School class, going to Sunday School and worship was an adventure. It was a great opportunity. He anticipated it with excitement and enthusiasm. That enthusiasm was contagious. Glen and I became excited about it, too. I feel the same way today. Let us share that enthusiasm about Sunday School and worship with our children.

We teach our faith. We model our faith. When Andy was about three years old, he and I were playing on some playground equipment at Tuckahoe Park in Arlington, Virginia. We were in Arlington visiting Melody's parents. Andy and I were walking on a wooden platform on a large, complex piece of equipment. There were a number of parents and children at the park. Suddenly, we heard a child cry out. We looked down. It was a young girl. Somehow, she had gotten hurt, and she was wailing. A young woman, perhaps her mother, was walking toward her. Andy turned to me and said, "Daddy, let's pray for that girl."

I knelt down to Andy's height and led a prayer that God would help the girl who got hurt. I was deeply grateful for Andy's compassionate heart. I was also glad that he realized that we could pray for her. Even at that young age, he had been a part of prayers many times in our family. We had modeled prayer for him.

Our children see how we love God, and that is how they learn how to love God.

Mark Schultz, a contemporary Christian singer, wrote a song titled, *She Was Watching*. This is how it goes:

"He always called her daddy's little girl / She was four years old
Waiting by the door to run into his arms / Each time that he came home.

And every night he tucked her in and read to her in bed,
When she'd fall asleep he'd close his eyes and gently bow his head.

But she was watching / Her daddy praying / And thought someday I wanna be like that.
She was watching what he was saying / And the way he bowed his head.
And though she can't recall the prayer / She was watching.

Late one evening he was coming home from work / He called to say he'd lost his job
And after dinner they excused their baby girl / She knew they had to talk.
But from inside her bedroom / She could hear them down the hall.
They were dancing in the kitchen as momma sang his favorite song.

She was watching / As they were dancing / And thought someday I wanna be like that.
She was watching / Her momma singing / As they were dancing hand in hand.
And though she can't recall the song / She was watching.

Faith can't be taught / It's just something that is caught along the way.
No, faith is never taught / It's just something that they catch from watching you along the way.

He always called her daddy's little girl / But now she's twenty-three.
He walks her down the aisle to give away his world / On, but he can hardly speak.
And when he kisses her goodbye he tries to hold it in / But as he turns away, she pulls
him close and whispers in his ear:

I was watching / And I've been waiting / And finally found someone just like you.
I was watching / My whole life praying / For God to see it through.
And as he kissed her one last time / He said a prayer and closed his eyes.
And she was watching."