

April 25, 2004

“FORMING THE SOUL OF THE CHILD”

Preached by Rev. Dr. Ivy Beckwith

When I speak to our new member classes about our children’s and family ministries I always begin my remarks by saying “At Colonial Church we are about the spiritual formation of children and families.” And I want to begin my remarks this morning in exactly the same way—at Colonial Church we are about the spiritual formation of children and families. But what I’ve discovered over the four years I’ve been saying this is that there are misconceptions about what it means to care for and nurture the souls of our children and families. People don’t often understand their own process of spiritual growth, let alone that of their children.

The spiritual formation of children in the words of 19<sup>th</sup> century pastoral theologian Horace Bushnell is about helping the child “to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.” The spiritual formation of a child is aiding that child from the time she is born to love God and follow Jesus. But as with lots of abstract concepts the spiritual formation of children is far easier to define than to put into practice.

There are three primary settings where the spiritual nurture of children happens. First and most importantly, the spiritual formation of children happens in families. After all, the child spends more time in the family than the child spends any where else. Families are the primary place of value transfer and modeling of behaviors whether good or bad so it makes sense that religious values and behaviors would be transferred to the children as well. Families are, also, the place where emotional well being and health is established or destroyed. I am a firm believer that emotional health and spiritual health are almost inseparable. Families are on the front lines of spiritual formation and hold the highest responsibility for it. The church is not primarily responsible for the spiritual formation of your children, you are.

The second important setting of spiritual formation for the child, but still not holding the importance of the family, is the community of faith. Every church is responsible for aiding in the care and nurture of its young. And the church is responsible in two ways. First, the community of faith has a responsibility to uphold families as they work to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities to their children. All the people of this community reaffirm that commitment every time we baptize or dedicate an infant. We promise to teach and nurture our community’s children because “they belong to us as well.” The second responsibility is to be a community that models loving God and following Jesus for our children. You are responsible to be a welcoming, authentic and trustworthy community allowing children opportunities to do things in and for this community and enabling children to hear the story of God and of God’s work among us. To make that happen you are responsible for building spiritually and emotionally significant relationships with the children and families of our covenant community of faith.

The third most important place of spiritual formation for the child is worship, corporate and personal. I believe that there is something about the experience of the community worshipping God together that is spiritually forming not just for our children but for everyone who participates. And I believe that to exclude children week after week from that experience is to blunt a superlative opportunity for their spiritual growth. But there is also a need to teach children about worship and how to worship which can be done outside of the weekly corporate worship of God. And there is a need to teach children about the personal worship of God and help them to value it as a personal spiritual discipline.

These are the three contexts most conducive to the spiritual formation of children; these are the places where it happens. But just naming the contexts does not answer the question "How does spiritual formation happen?" First, let's tackle how it doesn't happen. There is no profile of learning for spiritual formation. We cannot say "if a child knows this, this, and that by age five and that, that, and this by age ten this child will become a lover of God and a mature follower of Jesus." Loving God and following Jesus are actions and attitudes far more caught than taught. While there are concepts and ideas a child is better able to grasp and understand about the content of faith at certain age levels much of an active mature faith is more affective and kinesthetic than it is cognitive. We know lots of people who know well the content of the Bible, even down to having whole sections of it memorized, and who know the supposed tenets of Christianity who certainly don't act like people who follow Jesus. Even James Fowler, a researcher who proposes levels of faith development, says that adults can get stuck in less mature levels of faith never moving on to the next levels and factual knowledge of the faith never seems to be a determining factor in pushing one on to a higher level. And children do not become lovers of God and followers of Jesus because the churches they attend offer lots of programs for them to participate in. Passing on faith to children is not primarily a schooling enterprise. Church programs can be good for children if they are intentional about being places where adults and children build relationships with each other, if they are places where parents and children can learn together, if they are places where children practice the true worship of God, and if they are places where children are allowed to explore God's story and their own stories discovering where they intersect within the story of the community. Otherwise religious education programs for children are just misspent resources if the church's goal is really to spiritually form the child.

Now let's talk about how spiritual formation does happen. It has been said there are five processes of spiritual formation and if we, families and community, are intentional about involving our children in these five processes in the three contexts of spiritual nurture then we will be well on our way to forming our children to be lovers of God and followers of Jesus. The first of these is to involve children in a process of belonging. When the child experiences belonging in the community of the family the child will then understand what it feels like to belong, to have his or her place among other human beings, and will look for that within

other relational contexts. If children feel they are loved in the community of faith, if they feel they are loved by the people who say they follow Jesus—then those children will want to follow Jesus, too.

Second, children need to participate in the life of the family community and the life of the faith community in order for spiritual growth to happen. Children “need to be participants on occasions when the whole community affirms its faith relationship with God. Such occasions might well involve worship, times of mutual ministry, and also times of mission and service when believers reach out to share Christ’s love in the world.” (Larry Richards) What’s even better is when families do these things together within the confines of the community of faith. To truly care for the souls of our children we need to be a church that allows children to do things with and for the community—not just a church that does things for children.

The third process in the spiritual formation of the child is that the child needs to be involved in contexts and events that facilitate modeling by members of the faith community. Children need to be in places, both at home and at church, where they can be influenced by the positive behavior of adults and are given opportunities to imitate that behavior. Watching adults love God and follow Jesus can have a powerful impact on the spiritual nurture of our children. Conversely, seeing adults who don’t make the actions of following Jesus a priority will have that same powerful impact, only in a negative way. Children watch everything we do and learn far more from that than anything we ever say to them.

Fourth, children need to be involved in processes that provide biblical instruction as interpretation of life. Formal schooling in the faith is the least effective method of spiritual formation. Instead, parents and adults in the community of faith need to work at catching those teachable moments with children using every day instances to bring to the child’s mind to how to follow Jesus in heart and deed. As children walk side by side parents and other adults they catch the important attitudes and actions of faith by being totally immersed in a family of faith and a community of faith.

Last, for positive spiritual formation to happen children need to be involved in processes that encourage the growing exercise of personal choice. Faith is never mere intellectual assent to the tenets of the Bible. Everyday faith is a series of choices to follow God or not. If we have never taught the child to make positive choices or responsible choices how can we expect the child to make them when they enter adolescence or young adulthood? “To choose—to be responsible for one’s own faith response—is vital if our children are to have, and to grow in, faith.” (Larry Richards)

The soul care of our children is the responsibility of every person in the community of faith. If you are a parent you are responsible for the spiritual nurture of your child. You are responsible for modeling an authentic spiritual life

to your children and providing the contexts in which your child's faith can develop. If you are a member of this community you are responsible for the spiritual nurture of our children. It is your job to build relationships with children and their families and it is your job to help each child feel that this community is their community, too.

Unfortunately few adults, while maybe willing to nod assent to these responsibilities, are unwilling to put feet to them. A recent study by the Search Institute here in Minneapolis found that 75% of adults when asked were in agreement with the idea that it was important for them to know and spend time with children and youth in their churches and communities. However, a far smaller percentage, 34%, actually said they were doing anything about it. Theologian George Lindbeck writes the following about the failure of faith nurture of children in North American churches. "The challenge facing the church is in the bland, unconverted, ignorant lives of its members. Until adults in the church are knowledgeable in their faith, have experienced the transforming power of the Gospel, live radical lives characteristic of the disciples of Jesus Christ, no new curriculum, no new teacher, training programs, and no new educational technology will save us."

So this morning, this Children's Sunday 2004, I challenge the covenant community of Colonial Church to buck the trend. I challenge the covenant community of Colonial Church to truly care for its children and families by being a community authentically and wholeheartedly pursuing Jesus' dream for the world and by being a community where children are equal participants with adults in the covenant, by being a community dedicated to the spiritual nurture of children not the entertainment of children. Most churches in North America have lost their way when it comes to knowing how to care for the souls of their children, let us not be one of them.

I want to end this morning by reading you something I wrote for and then read in front of a national convention of church leaders a little over a year ago.

The church's ministry to children is broken. A cursory look doesn't reveal its brokenness. From the outside children's ministry looks healthier than ever. But it is broken. It's broken when church leaders and senior pastors see children's ministry as primarily a marketing tool. The church with the most outwardly attractive program wins the children and then the parents. It's broken when we teach children the Bible as if it were just another book of moral fables or stories of great heroes. Something's broken when we trivialize God to our children. It's broken when we exclude children from, perhaps, the most important of community activities—worship. It's broken because we've become dependent on an 18<sup>th</sup> century schooling model forgetting that much of a child's spiritual formation is affective, active, and intuitive. It's broken when we depend on our programs and our curriculum to introduce our children to God—not our families and communities. It's

broken when we've come to believe that church has to be something other than church to be attractive to children. It's broken when we spend lots of money making our churches into play lands and entice children to God through food fights and baptisms in the back of fire trucks. And perhaps most importantly it's broken when the church tells parents that its programs can spiritually nurture their children better than they can. By doing this we've lied to parents and allowed them to abdicate their responsibility to spiritually form their children. A church program can't spiritually form a child, but a family living in an intergenerational community of faith can. Our care for our children is broken and badly in need of repair. Let's imagine together a new way, a new future.