

Passing It On:

Preface:

It's an interesting time in the Church year, although most of us might not know it. We're in between two important celebrations that Christians all over the world pay attention to. The first is Christmas, of course. The other is called "Epiphany," which is an ancient Christian celebration of the way God was revealed to the world through Jesus, and particularly the way Jesus was revealed to Gentiles, non-Jews, when the wise men showed up to honor and worship him.

Soon enough, on February 2nd, many Christians will gather to celebrate something called "Candlemas," which focuses on Jesus' presentation at the Temple 40 days after his birth by his parents.

So we're in between these two ancient celebrations, Christmas and Epiphany. And it makes poetic sense, in between a celebration of Jesus' revelation to the Gentiles and his dedication at the Temple, to celebrate Cora today, and Tobin & Lisa's faithfulness and determination to raise her to know the Lord.

Their decision to dedicate their children to God follows Mary and Joseph's own example, but in a way, Cora is revealed to us, this morning, as a sign of her parents' commitments to follow Christ, too. She's an epiphany of their intent to stay faithful, walk with Christ, no matter what might come the way of their family.

Before we go any further this morning, I want to say that I've been watching the Mandalorian on Disney Plus during Christmas, and so, I think the best thing we can do with the rest of the morning is compare and contrast Cora and Baby Yoda, and Tobin & Lisa & the Mandalorian's parenting styles.

I'm kidding. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Introduction:

I want to consider one thing, really, this morning, and do that in a few different ways. How do we pass on our faith? How can we do it well? I won't talk long, of course, because the morning's already been full of good things: But how do we pass on our faith?

And not to everyone, but to those people who we have been charged to care for, who especially are much, much younger than us: our children, or our grandchildren, or our nieces and nephews. Kids. How do we pass our faith onto children?

Disclaimers:

And let me say a couple of disclaimers. We've all got opinions on this, I'm sure of it. There are few things more personal than child-rearing, and today's conversation is part of that.

And I don't want those of us who aren't raising kids

right now to tune me out. I hope that today's message can be relevant for all of us. It's my guess that all of us have been given permission by someone to help care for their kids, have been allowed a voice into the life of a child--whether it's the child of a friend or the child of a family member. And ultimately, we need to carry ourselves and act toward children in our lives in most of the same ways we act toward everyone else.

Beyond this: It's not unlikely that those of us who are parents of grown children, or nearly-grown children, have taken stock of how we've passed on our faith to our own children, and maybe even have some regrets about that--whether those regrets are that our children aren't as faithful as we wish they would be, or that we ourselves made missteps of some kind in the hand-off.

A reminder:

And so we need to remember this morning that to trust the Lord is part of a healthy relationship. And there are all sorts of things we can do to encourage our children, grandchildren, cousins, nieces, nephews, neighbors, whoever's young life we have influence in, all sorts of things we can do to encourage them to pursue a relationship with God.

But we can't transfer our relationship to God to them. It's not property, right? It's non-transferable. Relationships between people are non-transferable. And this is good news, it's good news for a couple of reasons.

These kids that we care for, they aren't us. They are different from us. Our relationship with God may not fit them perfectly, any more than our clothes might. And if we don't allow the kids we care for to have their own authentic, living relationship with God, but force them to relate to God just like we do, then it is something like dressing them in our clothes: they're kept warm, maybe, but they're always tripping 'cause the shoes are too big and can't lift themselves up because sleeves hang off their hands.

The fact that relationships are non-transferable is good, too, because it forces us to depend on God in a particularly demanding way: by praying.

We cannot force these kids we love to form a relationship with God. Remembering this causes us to turn to God in prayer and beg God to draw these children, grandchildren, friends' children, neighbors that we love into a relationship with him. Basic to everything we might do to pass on our faith is the fact that we must be in prayer on behalf of the children we love: that God would keep them safe, draw them into a trusting relationship with him, and help them to live for Jesus rather than themselves.

We can't do without prayer, we can't do without prayer: but of course there are things we can do alongside it.

Word & Deed:

Remember our mission statement as a congregation? I

know you remember it; I know you all, like me, got it tattooed in a secret place, because it's so compelling.

“We join together to pursue God's love, become more like Jesus, and build God's Kingdom through word & deed.”

This “by word and deed part” is basic in all sorts of ways, but it's basic especially as shorthand for how we might pass our faith on to everyone--and even especially those kids that we love, into whose lives we've been given the gift and responsibility to speak. Let me leverage it for this morning, if I can.

Regarding “Word”:

There's a passage we read whenever we join together in communion, reminding ourselves that God has not only wanted to be our friends and be in a relationship with us, but that God has also drawn us into a relationship with one another.

It starts with this: “For I received from the Lord what I also passed onto you.” And from there, of course, Paul goes on to tell us all about what Jesus did and said at that last meal with his first followers, and how Jesus pointed to the way his death would come and it would be for us.

It's funny, of course, because Paul's writing to the Corinthians reminding them of what he's already told them. And I'm sure when he spent time there he reminded them about the same stuff over and over

and over again.

In order to pass our faith on, we have to, must, talk about it. We have to “pass it on” in the way Paul “passed onto” the Corinthians basic truths about Jesus’ life and work.

I have some very good friends who are Mennonite-- and I mean, Mennonite. Culturally Mennonite. Multi-generational Mennonites. And the problem they share with me about their experience as Christians is that their churches simply don’t, outside Church-stuff, talk about faith. Faith is such a private matter, such a personal matter, that parents don’t share what they believe and why with their children. Kids don’t hear from adults what they believe about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, why they believe what they believe, the doubts that they’ve faced, and the miracles they’ve experienced. They don’t discuss their struggles, their concerns, the limits of their theology, or the grace in they experience in their pain.

They act it out, they model Jesus, they dutifully attend all the churchy things they can fit on their calendar, and are generous with their time, their treasure, their talent: but the why’s and the how’s and the truth’s go unshared. And my friends have experienced this as a loss.

Now: It may simply be the case that we adults are just generally terrible at sharing with our kids our own life experiences, bad at speaking about what we’ve gone

through, what we believe about life and love and why. I realized again as I prepared this message that I have very little idea what my parents--much less aunts and uncles or family friends--believe about anything, the joys and hardships that they've gone through, any of these things. I barely know. I'm learning more, as the years go by, but the conversations that would have been natural when I was down the hall from them are forced now that I'm removed by miles, and all the FaceTime and Skype in the world doesn't make that easier.

But I don't want Bo to grow up not knowing what I believe about the Lord and life and Christianity because I have not spoken to her about it. And insofar as I have a voice to speak into the lives of the children of my friends--some of yours--I want them to know what I believe and why, too.

Should we protect our children and others' from the dark sorrows of the world? Of course. We've got to: I mean, frankly, kids don't have the hardware to deal with most of what's terrible about life--their brains physically can't handle it. That's why childhood trauma is trauma. But they can know we've come to trust Christ. They can hear from our mouths, regularly, what Jesus has done for us and for them.

This is basic stuff, right? Boring stuff. But how are we doing at it, insofar as we have voice into the life of a child? And let me say this: If we don't talk with our spouses, with our best friends, with other Christians

about the way Jesus is proving his love for us, we're never going to talk to kids about this stuff. We just aren't. So: Do your best friends, your spouses-- hopefully that's single, one spouse, for us--do Christians know how your relationship with God is? Do they know what you believe and why?

Regarding "Deed":

But we have to do more than just talk about Jesus, right? The devil knows Scripture, and could recite it to kids better than most of us could.

Remember Aesop? You know Aesop. Wrote a bunch of fables? Aesop? (Aesop Aesop Aesop!) Way better than Kipling's Just-So stories.

Remember the one with the momma crab, who chides--yes, chides--her child for walking sideways, which is so, gauche--or droit, depending, I guess--that was a hilarious french joke, by the way--but the little crab is walking sideways, and momma crab is like, "That's shameful. That's terrible. Walk straight!" And the child crab says, "Show me, Mom: I'll do it!" But the mom can't show the kid, and the kid crab chides her back. This is the only Aesop fable I remember. The only one.

"Example," Aesop says, "is more powerful than precept." Which is just an Aesop way of saying that information alone, rules alone, challenges alone--they don't have the same authority or ability to influence as lived out examples, do.

Paul knows this. This is why he can say to the Thessalonians “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.”

For Paul, word always accompanies deed. The two go together. “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,” he says to the Philippians, “and the God of peace will be with you.”

And in the passage that was read to us from his first letter to Timothy, Paul starts with the reminder “You...know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.”

“Timothy,” he says, “You know everything.” “You know all about me.” And knowing all about someone doesn’t happen by accident. It means that we not only speak about what we experience or have experienced, but our lives are lived in light of it. We live up to what we say we believe. We love people enough to give them our deeds as well as our words.

Without pride or qualification Paul tells the Corinthians “I appeal to you..be imitators of me.” He knows that

his example of a faithful life is one that is worth imitating. He also knows that his behavior matches what he's said, and in that integrity, he can call people to mimic him.

In that passage from Timothy that was read to us, Paul goes on after talking about the way Timothy knows him--his life and what he believes--to say: "...continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus."

It's not just that Timothy has learned, it's that he knows the people from whom he's learned it. He's seen them, watched them, lived with them, cared for them, been loved by them. Remember, Timothy—like many of us, and like the course that's set for Cora, and her brother and sisters, for all the children of our church and so many little ones we love—Timothy grew up in the church. Paul can say to him "I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you."

What I pray for all the kids in whose lives we have a voice, Smoky Row kids, neighborhood kids, family kids--I don't care--what I hope is that they can have what Timothy had in some way. That in some way they can learn by word and deed, by being told and being given a model of what it means to be a Christian, to

have a sincere faith, to “live a godly life in Christ Jesus.”

Conclusion:

We have to ask ourselves how well we’re doing passing on the faith that we ourselves have “learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom we have learned it.”

We can make all the commitments in the world, intend to act and speak in all sorts of ways, and find, in the final analysis, that our intentions were never really followed through. Our resolutions had everything but resolve.

If this is a call to pass our faith on to the kids whose lives we have a voice in, behind it stands the challenge that little Cora's dedication leaves us all with: How are things going between us and the Lord? How is that relationship?

I doubt that any of us are like mother crabs, you know, just telling anybody what to do but never doing it ourselves, and I doubt that any of us intend to live any way but like the way Jesus lived. But I hope that we’re at least praying that those kids around us--even our own, even if they’re grown--might see in us an honest faith and might hear from our own lips what it is we believe and how that influences our lives. It is never too late to take this up, you know? Pass your faith on by word and deed. Become like Jesus, and talk about God well. Children will be grateful for it, and even

adults, too. But at the end of the day, if we try to do this well, we'll discover it's great benefit not only for those we care for, but even for ourselves.