

The Two Shall Become One, and Then Two, and Then Three...

Matthew 19:1-6

June 15, 2008

Rev. Curtis J. Young

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In I Corinthians, after commending his own example of the single life, Paul wrote, “But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.” (I Cor. 7:28)

This morning if we had time, I would take us on a field trip to meet troubles. Yes, indeed, we’d go up one flight of stairs, to the second floor nurseries, and meet troubles!

Troubles that crawl and toddle, build things and break things, laugh like silly monsters and cry inconsolably; troubles that play and pout, hop around like bunnies and skirmish like bear cubs, that love to say “no” but hate to hear it.

If it weren’t for the strong love of adults, they’d hold each other hostage for ransoms involving hundreds of animal crackers.

Paul wasn’t referring to children when he named “troubles”, but this morning, I do want us to think about the rest of the story. When men and women marry, the two become one, and then so often, two, then three, then four.

For most of us this is thankfully a matter of simple addition, but for some of multiplication. Most couples will adopt or give birth to one at a time. Others are more ambitious.

What I want you to think with me about this morning is the reality of the stress that parenthood puts on marriage. The Bible promises that for those who fear the Lord, children are a blessing, and the fruit of the womb is a reward. (Ps. 127) At the same time, scripture is quite clear that parenthood is a monumental sacrifice for the sake of love: To nurture, provide for, and protect the defenseless, the helpless, the dependent.

It is because parenthood is costly and stressful, that rich assurances are given again and again. The price of parenthood is one assumption behind the command that children honor their parents.

After Adam and Eve sinned, the Lord said to Eve, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing...” (Gen. 3: 16) The statement is true in itself, yet as a poetic metaphor, it speaks more broadly.

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In this fallen world there is suffering associated with love and anxiety with responsibility. Eve tasted this immediately with her firstborn, Cain. Is there any doubt that Adam and their marriage also were deeply affected?

Yet what was true in regard to the wicked son, Cain, was also true of the sinless son, Jesus. Was Mary not distressed by her son? Did a sword not pierce her soul as well? (Luke 2:35) When Jesus remained behind the temple so that Mary and Joseph could not find him for three days, do you think their marriage did not reflect this distress?

There is no such thing as good stress or bad stress. There are, however, levels of stress. Low stress leaves most people unmotivated to excel in whatever their challenge is. High stress cripples them so they can't excel. Good things can produce very high levels of stress.

Many of you have heard of the life stress inventory developed by Holmes and Rahe. It assigns values to 43 commonplace life experiences or events. At the end of the inventory you add up the values of the life experiences that describe your life. If the total reaches 150 points, there is a 50% chance of a major health breakdown within two years.

A divorce is assigned 73. Marital reconciliation is 45. Marriage is 50. Whether you suddenly lose a great deal of money or come into a great deal of money, the stress factor is the same, 38.

So, if you add a child to your family, that's 39. If you add a loan for that mini-van you now need, that's 17 (56). If you add the major change in employment because Mom stops working, or cuts back on hours or telecommutes, that's 26 (82). If you take on a mortgage and buy a house for your expanding family, that's 31 (113). If the car loan, the mortgage, the change in work, and the baby, causes a spike in disagreements and arguing, that's 35 (148).

Add a traffic ticket, and you might as well go straight to the emergency room. It'll be two years before they can see you anyway.

Researchers agree that in the life of a marriage, the most stressful period is after the birth of the first child.

David Popenoe at Rutgers University labels as a myth the idea that having a child will help a couple improve their marital satisfaction.

The Divorce Peers web site reprints findings that "parents are more likely to think about getting a divorce than nonparents." Not that they necessarily act on it, but they think about it.

Two weeks ago I was in class in St. Louis. The fellow on my right has seven children. The fellow on my left has nine children. And they were happy!!! You could tell, they smiled. The fellow on my left with nine children has a family in his church with 28 children. Somewhere along the line they fell into the anti-statistical habit of adopting special needs children and loving them.

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Who do they think they are running up the curve? In fact countless couples love being parents and love each other more and more over the years. For Christian couples, this is a key part of the reason why:

They believe with all their hearts that their marriage is part of a story that is far bigger than themselves and that is far more wonderful as well. The story line goes like this: Creation – Fall – Redemption – Restoration.

When God created Adam and Eve, he told them, “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it.” This is part of the creation that God describes as very good.

God’s purpose in creation was that human life springs from love. To this end, god created the most complex biochemistry in all creation and made it love’s servant.

In Ephesians 3, Paul introduced that great prayer for believers to be filled up to the fullness of God and to know his love that surpasses knowledge, with : “For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom all fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named...”

God’s created parenthood to express his love for our children. Or put differently, God created parenthood, so that the love he has for his creatures (mankind at least) is expressed specifically through parents to their children.

Granted, all has been subject the fall, so no good thing is unaffected by sin, misery, and death. Yet to his word of creation, our Father has added his word of redemption. Not a command but promise kept in Christ; a promise of grace, mercy, and help; an assurance of his faithfulness to us and to our children, for all who love him.

This is why we are told in Psalm 127: “Children are a reward from the Lord”... Or why we can say with Psalm 139: “You knit me together in my mother’s womb...My frame was not hidden to you...How precious concerning me are your thoughts, O God.” Or why the Gospel has assured us since Pentecost, “For the promise if for you and your children...”

In Luke 18, Jesus rebuked his disciples for blocking parents from bringing their children to him. He then called the children to himself and said, “The Kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” What a great assurance for parents!

In the Father’s love for Jesus his Son, we see delight and joy. We see the suffering and sacrifice of the Father in sending him.

We should expect the same. And expect that as we pursue parenthood as a vocation, as an act of faith, as part of story that is greater than ourselves, parenthood will serve to sanctify us. By this I mean our marriages.

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It moves us from love for self to love for others. It moves us from thinking of ourselves less and of others more. It confronts us the limits of our influence and the power of our words. In Christ, parenthood is a journey toward humility.

Those who submit to the painful disciplines of the journey – and here I refer to parents – are taught by them, and the result is a harvest of righteousness and peace in their lives.

God knows exactly what he is doing in calling us to parenthood today. Let me illustrate it. Russ Moxley directs the Center for Creative Leadership. He has asked, “What is the best way for smart people to learn?”

Putting them in training program is fine, or assigning them mentors is helpful. The most effective way to teach smart people to learn by having them go through hardships with support of wise counselors.

Why? Because hardships force people to recognize their limitations and own up to their mistakes, open them up to be teachable and to change.

By God’s common grace, the world is learning things that are well taught in Scripture.

James 1:2-5: Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

There’s the benefit and the support. Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Rom. 5:3-4)

There again, is the benefit and the support. In Titus and elsewhere, we learn older women are to mentor younger women and older men, younger men.

Mentors are important, not because they impart ideas – you can read a book for ideas – but because they impart confidence to endure the stress and encouragement to make the hard choice when the hard choice is needed. One of those choices is to trust the Lord so you can be not only a calm parent, but a confident, supportive husband or wife.

I’ve flown several times the last two weeks. I’m used to hearing, “If there is a sudden loss in cabin pressure, an oxygen mask will drop from the ceiling overhead. Take the mask, and pull the tube to get the oxygen flowing. Put on your own mask first before assisting your children.”

My own mask first? If I weren’t told that, I would think a good parent puts his child’s mask on first. But someone in the FAA figured out that if Mom and Dad aren’t getting the oxygen they need, they’re not in any shape to help their children get the oxygen they need.

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The same is true of parenthood. If couples aren't getting what they need to thrive in their marriage, you won't be able to give their children the oxygen they need.

Mary Anne McPherson Oliver has written, "The couple is unlike the individual in that it must act for its own preservation in a much more deliberate way than the individual. Individuals...rarely forget to eat, whereas couples often forget to nourish their relationship."

If this is generally true in marriage, how much more true is it when you have the added stress and demands of parenthood?

I would say to all of you who are raising children: Understand parenthood may well be the greatest joy in your marriage but also the greatest challenge to your marriage.

We take vows as a church to support you in every way we can in raising you children, to be the arms of Christ in order to welcome them, and also to reassure you.

There is one thing that only you can do: Make the first priority in your marriage to nurture your life together so you can nurture the life of your children; and trust the Lord for his faithfulness to you and your children.