

IT TAKES A FAMILY:
THE FAMILY AS CHURCH
II Timothy 1:3-8

Dr. J. Howard Olds
June 13, 2004

In the big game of life, what really matters? I find myself asking that question more and more these days. The blessing and curse of surviving a life-threatening disease is that it causes you to lift up the floorboards of your soul and examine the priorities of your life. What really matters in the light of eternity?

Lost golf balls don't matter to me any more — Lost people do. Church conferences don't matter much to me anymore. Local churches where God and people make a connection do matter. Family status will not matter in the light of eternity. Family faith will make all the difference.

Today I would like to talk pragmatically about the faith of our families. On what do you and your family set your hearts and shape your life? What is the overarching, integrating, grounding faith that gives life unity and meaning? How can you communicate that faith to your children and grandchildren? What happens at your house may be more important than what happens at the White House.

WHAT IS THE FAITH FACTOR OF YOUR FAMILY?

When Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy, he begins by noting the sincere, genuine, unwaxed faith which first lived in his grandmother, Lois, and his mother, Eunice, and now has become the guiding light of Timothy's life.

Timothy was raised by a single mother and an influential grandmother. His father, an unbeliever, had either divorced the family or died. In a time when it was almost impossible for a single mother to make it, Eunice, with the help of Lois, by faith, pulled it off.

What is the faith factor of your family? On a scale of one to ten how important has faith development been in your home? How important do you want it to be? Does it hold its own with soccer and success? Faith is a life long developmental process. It takes a lifetime to develop a life of faith.

Faith Comes by Experience.

Faith is felt before it is formulated. Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus to the temple to be dedicated when he was eight days old. Did Jesus know what was going on? Maybe more than we realize.

Faith is caught before it is taught. When a mother nurses an infant, she is communicating God's care. When a father bandages a cut, he is extending God's healing. When families play together, they experience God's joy. When families

forgive, they practice God's grace. Families learn they are sacred communities when they begin to name and claim the many forms of God's grace in their daily life.

Faith deepens by belonging.

Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me
Not for the years of time alone, but for eternity.
Such a thought anchored me as a child. Now I belong to Jesus, Jesus belongs to me. We need to belong.

Dick Murray tells in one of his books about Mrs. Pickford, his primary teacher. "I do not remember the lessons she taught, but I remember Mrs. Pickford very well. She was gracious, understanding, warm. She made us feel valuable and able. Her only problem was she was naïve. She kept saying she was sure I wouldn't do anything wrong, when I knew all along I was fully planning to do so. The strange thing is I often proved her right, because I couldn't let her down. When I started to do wrong, I would remember Mrs. Pickford." When I read Dick's story I thought about my own mother. I thought about how I was not that good when I was a kid but many times I stayed out of harm's way simply because I didn't want to disappoint my mother and let her down. Respect for my mother kept me out of all kinds of trouble. Faith deepens by belonging. When that connection is strong, our faith grows.

Faith stretches by questioning.

Reader's Digest ran a list of proverbial 'why is it?'

Why is it that some people have a great frame of mind and no picture?
Why is it that you pay for a short cut in the long run?
Why is it that a chip on the shoulder can get to be a heavy load?
Why is it that jumping to conclusions is not half as good an exercise as digging for the facts?
Why is it that the employee who butters up the boss is usually the one who can't cut the mustard?

The reality is that faith has its questions too.

Why do bad things happen to good people?
Why do the evil prosper?
Where is God when it hurts?
If life is a bowl of cherries, why am I always in the pits?
Why is this happening to me?

We must live into the questions until there is a peace that passes all understanding even when there is not an answer to a specific question. You can discover a peace that passes all understanding in the midst of the question. *Ask and you will receive. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened unto you.* Asking, seeking, knocking are as much a part of faith as receiving,

finding, opening.

Faith endures by maturing

Ephesians 4:13 says, *Let there be no prolonged infancies among us please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for imposters. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—to be like Christ in everything.* (Message Bible)

DC Talk music group member, Michael Tait says, “My Dad taught me two very important things. Love people—all kinds of people. Live for God and don’t get caught up in the things of the world.” Therein lies Christian maturity. Love people and live for God.

What is the faith factor in your family? Where does it measure on the scale of importance and time?

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO FAN THE FLAMES OF FAITH?

Paul says to Timothy *“For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God which is in you.”* The image is a campfire that is smoldering through the night. You have to dig in it to find a live coal. The only way to get it to burn is to fan those coals into a flame. “It only takes a spark to get the fire going, and then all those round can warm up to its glowing.”

How can we fan into flame the fires of faith? Fan it in your own life and in the lives of those you love.

We can live the faith.

I visited my dentist this week. Of all the rooms available he always puts me in this bright Tennessee orange room with a plaque on the wall that reads like this:

I'd rather a see sermon than hear one any day.
I'd rather one should walk with me than merely show the way.
The eye is a better pupil, more willing than the ear.
Fine counsel is confusing, but example is always clear.
And the best of all the preachers are the ones who live their creeds,
For to see a good put into action is what everybody needs.

When our oldest son, Wes, was going through those adolescent struggles with the faith as adolescents do, he blurted out to me one day, “Those people up at the church think you are great. But they don’t have to live with you. I do.” Feeble as we may be, we need to live the faith.

We can tell the story.

The stories of our faith need to be imbedded in our hearts and often on our lips. Children love a good story. The stories of faith are pleasant to repeat. It seems each time we tell them, they become more wonderfully sweet.

Caleb was intent on telling us the story of Adam and Eve recently. “And what does that story teach you?” I asked my four-year-old grandson. “It tells us that Adam and Eve made some very bad choices,” he said. He got it!

Who does not identify with “a certain man had two sons? One a prodigal, one a self-righteous jerk.” We can find ourselves in the stories of faith.

The problem of our day is that the only people telling stories are on television or video. Most of them are selling something. We need to recover the art of telling the stories of faith. Fan into flame the fires of faith. Don’t let the fire go out.

We can learn to pray.

We can be still and know that God is God. A couple of years ago, I was speaking down at Mt. Eagle Assembly for a spiritual emphasis week. I noticed on the brochure that quiet time was held on the campus every afternoon from 1-2:30. There were kids everywhere. Toddlers, teenagers, all swimming, riding bicycles, having fun. I said to Sandy, “I wonder how this quiet time works.” Much to my surprise, the whole campus got quiet at 1 p.m. I said to parents, “How did you pull that off?” They said, “Oh, that’s just what we do at Mt. Eagle.” Be still and know that I am God. Are there places where you take a step back and even as a family get quiet? We can pray.

Richard Foster says, “I like to lay my hands on my children lightly as they are asleep and imagine the light of Christ healing any trauma from the day and filling them with peace.”

We can teach breath prayers. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Others Lord, yes others. My God, my all. Lord, help me make it through the night. Breath prayers. Prayers to have in the moment of need. Fan into flame the fires of faith. The family that prays together, stays together. It may sound trite but it is true.

We can serve our neighbors.

Families are not ends in and of themselves. We are but one piece of the fabric of society. One of the things parents can do is help a child cultivate a vision for the world. That’s why things like mission trips are so important in the formation of young people. One of the things we can do is lift our eyes and see the rest of the world. We can encourage the values of faith over the values of culture.

Being, as opposed to doing,
Sharing, as opposed to possessing,
Mercy, as opposed to revenge,
Equality, as opposed to control.

We can teach people that. We can teach people how to be generous. A child by the name of William placed a dollar in the offering plate some months ago with this note attached: “Dear God, I love you much. When I get to heaven I want to love you even more. I want to give you something today and bow down to you

forever. Signed, William.” He probably was no more than six years old. With this sense of generosity can you imagine what this fellow may accomplish as an adult; what kind of help he will be for the world when as a young child he has learned to be generous and to share in the needs of all humanity? Can you imagine what this kid is going to do?

We can participate in acts of mercy.

I used to take my son with me to visit the nursing home. They didn't care if I came but they delighted in the sight of a child. You don't have to wait for the church choir tour or mission trip. You can do it on your own. Fan into flames the fires of faith because that's what matters in the light of eternity.

When it comes to your family, are you investing in the things that really matter? Paul says to his young friend, *God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline.* Keep the faith burning. Fan the flames of faith. It could make an eternal difference.

Amen.

