

Poor Parenting

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Genesis 21:8-21

“But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the boy...’”

Parents have a lot to worry about. Parents have responsibilities, they have burdens, and they have anxieties and fears always weighing over their head. We like to think of the wonder and beauty of a newborn child. The theologian and pop culture expert Tom Beaudoin shared a poem his father wrote when Beaudoin was born.

A MOTHER AND CHILD

A Son with a smile
Bring new spring flowers and leaves
To a World brought to its knees
By winter and hardness and cold.
Mother. Son.
A world new begun.
Thank you God.” (Taken from *Virtual Faith*, 4.)

The words of hope and blessing typify the ideal of new parents. To be a parent means you are in one way or another committing to be an influential and essential part of the child’s life. You are committing to be responsible for another life. So it is no surprise to think that parents are scared, unsure, and anxious. After all, it is a scary thing to be a parent because you have so much influence over how your child will turn out. I bet the parents here can relate. When you hold that infant in your arms, when you look into its eyes and realize that he or she is totally dependant upon you, have you ever found yourself saying, “I hope I don’t screw up!”?

One of the places parent’s anxiety stems from are the “what ifs.” There are so many “what ifs” that can plague your conscious. What if you live in the wrong neighborhood, what if you send your child to the wrong school, what if you put your child in the accelerated program and he or she can’t keep up? What if you keep your child in the normal classes and he or she ends up being board? What if you don’t hug your child enough? What if you hug your child too much? What if you skimmed over an essential part of Dr. Spock’s classic book on child raising that would offer the key insight avoid poor parenting and would lead to raising your child well?

In one *Simpson’s* episode, Lisa, the brainy one, was failing gym class and went into a trail of “what ifs.” What if the F in gym was on her permanent record, then she wouldn’t get into a preparatory school, then she wouldn’t get admitted to Harvard, and she would have to settle for a school like Vassar. Parents have those “what if” worries when they think about the great responsibility of raising a child.

Look at Sarah and Abraham. They have been told by God that they were to be the parents of a great nation. Well what if they don’t have any children? Would they have failed God? Abraham has a child with Hagar, his servant, to make sure that he had some kind of offspring (and this practice was not uncommon at the time). Then Sarah becomes pregnant, and more “what ifs” occur. What if Ishmael, Hagar’s child, claims Abraham’s inheritance as the first-born? What then of Isaac? What then of Sarah, Abraham’s wife? What if the two brothers become rivals, splitting a nation before it was even formed?

Parenting leads to a great amount of anxiety with the what ifs and the unknowns weighing over the many, many decisions which have to be made. And without even talking about the societal pressures, the dangers of the world and many other things to worry about we begin to see the difficulties of parenting. Parents have a lot to worry about.

But we all have a lot to worry about, don't we? Parents or not, we all have our own "what ifs" that plague our mind, that eat away at our consciousness and drive our anxieties. With every decision we are faced with in our lives, we wonder and wonder if we made the right choice. Did we take the right job? Did we choose the best place to live? Did we speak when we should have been silent, or should we have been silent instead of speaking? Then there are those decisions, which have no "right" answer; these are the dilemmas, sometimes moral and sometimes just practical, that we all encounter from time to time. In the TV series *Everwood*, Andy, a brilliant brain surgeon, was faced with a choice. A teenage boy in the town suffered brain damage because of an accident, and a serious and risky operation could give him a normal life. Andy is faced with the choice to operate and take a big risk, or let someone else do it. Andy operates, and the teenage boy dies during operation. For the next couple of shows, Andy finds himself wondering, "what if." The Terry Schiavo case is a classic "what if" moral anxiety. We face those choices and anxieties again and again and wonder if we have made and are making the right choices with our lives, and such wonderings, such choices causes great anxiety.

In the Bible passage, Abraham is faced with a choice. Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, should be the one to inherit this kingdom which God has promised, yet by all rights Ishmael deserves the inheritance as the first born. Can you imagine Abraham and Sarah saying, "what if we never made that decision for you to have a child with Hagar?" Can you hear Abraham wondering what to do know with both of his beloved sons? Sarah is right, for Isaac to be head of this nation, as God has suggested must happen, Ishmael must go. Yet Abraham loves Ishmael as a father loves his son, and the choice tears at him. What is the right thing to do, what is the best thing to do? There is no easy answer, and we are faced with these kinds of decisions again and again. Especially as Christians we are faced with decisions that call to question the role of the cross in our lives. In our churches we are faced with decisions that are ambiguous. Decisions that have no clear-cut answer but with choices that must be made. Kierkegaard calls us to make the "either/or" choice, to decide one way or another, to be brave and take the plunge, but what if we go the wrong way. We stand before a crossing in the road, and we aren't sure which way is right, and there is no Scare Crow perched on a post to offer us options. In our lives, in our church, in our family we have anxiety over the what ifs, we all have a lot to worry about.

How do you react? How do you respond to your choices thrust upon you – your life difficulties, and life challenges? One of the aspects of this passage that captured my imagination was the different ways Sarah, Abraham and Hagar responded to the complex anxieties of life. Remember that these are human people living in a real situation, trying to understand how to be loyal to God and survive. The great biblical scholar, Robert Alter suggests that the character's thoughts, motives and morals portrayed in all of the Hebrew text can give us a very real consciousness upon which to engage and react.

Look at Sarah. She gets angry and jealous. It may be because Ishmael was mocking Isaac because Ishmael was the first-born. Abraham tries to hide and gets anxious when he finds himself caught between his love for his son, his love for Isaac, and his desire to stay true to God's plan. Hagar wants to run away when she feels out of options to save her child. They are all looking at Ishmael and all react in different ways. It is like they are all reading a menu with only one food option. Sarah hates the choice and throws down the menu in disgust. Abraham, trying to watch his cholesterol, looks at the choice, and worries if it will be good for his health. Hagar is allergic to the food, orders it, and then refuses to eat it, turning her back on the option thrust upon her. Sarah casts Ishmael out, Abraham worries over Ishmael, and Hagar leaves Ishmael to die.

But we cannot criticize the choices any of them made. We cannot label them as poor parents, as negligent or selfish. Each one was doing the best that he or she could do in those circumstance – do we not also do the same. How would you react? How do you respond to difficult decisions thrust upon you? How do you live through those choices with no good answers? How do you stay true to God as you work through the complexities of life as you hold your nose and hope you are doing the right thing?

Here is the hope – God stays with us. God does not leave us to our own devices. God does not set

us down and say, figure it out on your own without my help. No, God stays with us, works with us, and guides us. If we make a decision that might not be the best, God takes our mess and makes it right, in one way or another. God takes us through the sticky situation, and uses that situation for something good. Have you heard of the great Jazz trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie? In his early days, Gillespie was playing in a club, and in-between sets, he placed his trumpet on the piano. Now remember that Jazz was not played in “respectable” places at that time, and somehow its trumpet was knocked to the floor, bending the part of the bell 45 degrees up from the rest of the trumpet. Can you imagine Dizzy Gillespie’s shock and dismay as he picked up his broken instrument? This was to be his dream – it was his hope and his love and now it is ruined. What was he to do now? Where could he go, who could he be? We can only imagine that these questions were running through his head as he lifted the trumpet to his lips, and in a last ditch of desperation tried to sound a note. It worked! And more than that, the trumpet sounded better than ever, and became one of the trademark ways of recognizing Dizzy Gillespie.

God took a broken, a lost situation and made it holy, and this is how it is with our life. God stays with us, even when we make broken decisions, even when we are faced with hopelessness – God is still there. Abraham fretted about sending Hagar and Ishmael – but God said, I am with you and I will be with them. Hagar gave up hope with Ishmael, and God said, I am with you and I am with your son. As the scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests, God was not ready to give up on Ishmael, even though Isaac was to be the chosen child of Abraham, God still took from his anguished exit and made a great nation. Make your choices, live your life, take your chances knowing that God will walk with you, making right what may go wrong, making holy the mundane, and guiding you all the way.

This is the grace of God. This, which makes our flawed decisions, our valiant efforts holy, is the grace of God. Thomas Aquinas, one of our great theologians, said that grace is something that works in us and then works with us.

Grace first guides us on the right path. God wanted Isaac to be the next one after Abraham, and God led Abraham and Sarah to have Isaac. It was grace which gave Abraham the courage to follow God into a foreign land; it was grace which gave Abraham the faith that some day he and Sarah would have a child. It was grace, which eased Abraham’s fears and concerns for his son Ishmael. Grace working in Abraham also works in us.

Think about the ways you have been led by God. Think about your convictions, your beliefs. Was it God’s grace, which ultimately led you to Christ? Think about the grace you initially receive when professing Christ as Lord and savior. This is grace, which brings you into the loving arms of God, forgiven and redeemed. This is the grace of baptism, the grace that allows you to live, truly live, knowing that you have been forgiven and redeemed. Grace that works in you.

And then God’s grace works with you. God worked with Hagar, God opened Hagar’s eyes so that she could see the well. God gave Hagar hope, and then said, do what you are supposed to do. Be Ishmael’s parent and I will make your actions complete. And then God worked with Hagar to save Ishmael. Grace works with us and often times despite ourselves. We make our decisions, we try to do right, and then we leave it in God’s hands, because God’s grace will work through us to make our actions sacred and holy.

Even when we try to stay to the cross, we will from time to time fall and fail. Even when we say yes to Christ and try to walk his path, we will falter. Even when we embrace the responsibilities of being a parent and have even intention of being the best parent, there will be times when we did not make the best decision. Even when we claim that we are going to live life in the fullest way, glorifying God, we will from time to time make poor decisions. That is where a lot of our anxiety comes from – but God will still be with us. God’s grace works with us and makes our efforts and our work complete. Don’t worry about anything else; just stay true to the story and God will give us the grace by which our actions will soar. Just make the decision and God will give us the grace through which glory will emerge no matter what we decide. The grace of God makes us people worthy to be in the presence of God and completes our actions for the sake of God.

So all we have to do is continue to follow Jesus, and trust God. In your life, all you have to do is keep your eyes on the cross and trust God. Trust God as Abraham trusted God. Trust God as Hagar trusted God. Trust God as those many great witnesses before us trusted God. Those who founded this

church trusted God that their efforts would not be in vain. The religious leaders in the civil rights movement trusted God. Bonhoeffer and the church resisting the Nazi regime in Germany in the 1930s trusted God. There was a time when I was working late here at the church and the doorbell rang. My first response was to ignore it so I could finish my work and go home to my family. My second response was to ignore it because it was probably someone looking for money. But God stirred my heart, reminded me that this church is here to invite people to come and experience the grace God offers. So I went to the door. I trusted God. I saw a young man; my heart sank because I was sure he was going to ask for money. But I trusted God, and I opened the door. That young man was looking for the one thing the church has to offer; God's love and forgiveness. Despite my own reservations, despite my own anxieties, God worked through me. I trusted God, and God's glory was known.

Those who dedicate themselves to hopeless causes and lost possibilities trust that God will be with them. Trust God and act, trust God and live, trust God and be the person God called you to be.

There will be times when you find yourself walking through a miry bog, walking through ambiguity and uncertainty but keep your eyes on the cross and trust in God. Your actions will be made holy. Your life will be made for glory. And you will experience the grace of God working in you and with you. And when you look back on your time in the church, on your time in your life, and on your time as a parent you may find yourself wondering – was I good enough. Did I try hard enough? And I am here to tell you today that God answers, “yes.” You were good enough and God made it complete.

AMEN