

Key Factors to Children's Faith Formation: Strong Teaching

Deuteronomy 6: 1-9; 1Timothy 4: 6-16; Acts 2: 37-41

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Strong teaching is essential to learning for life. And we find a great example of strong teaching in Deuteronomy – teaching that lasted thousands of years.

Deuteronomy is in that section of the Hebrew Bible known as the Torah – the Law or the Teachings. These Teachings were given to Moses by the LORD with the charge to pass them on to the children of Israel. After 40 years of being in an exclusive community wandering in the wilderness they were about to encounter other cultures and they needed to remember who they belonged to; they were considered one entity as the descendents of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they were blessed to be a blessing, and to do that they needed to do good behaviours and to live distinctively as God's people.

The teaching that we are looking at in Chapter 6 verses 4-9 is first part of a set of Scriptures called the *Shema* (shmah): it means "hear *and* obey"

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶ Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷ Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸ Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹ and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6: 4-9 NRSV)

These scriptures were recited by God's children morning and evening each day as a declaration of loyalty to God's covenant. They committed to love God and to be obedient to him, to teach the Scriptures to the children and to keep them in heart/mind all the time – now that is strong teaching!

"Recite them" holds the meaning of teaching diligently, incisively, ... there is the sense of "sharpness", no stumbling, but living and active teaching so it would pierce the children's hearts and minds – they should never forget. Loving and obeying God was to be all pervasive.

They literally followed the instruction to... “Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,” putting the *shema* and three other scriptures (Exo 13:1-10, 13:11-16, Deut 11:13-21) in *tefillin* or *phylacteries* – tiny leather boxes tied to their hands or forehead – in Jesus’ time they were worn all day – today they are worn only during prayer.

“...write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”. In case you ever forget or lose your memory have it in all the most common places so you can read it.

We should be thankful for this “strong teaching”. Because of it we have the Hebrew Bible or what we refer to as the Old Testament.

Teaching was different then – it was much more relational, like discipleship – it commanded relationship with the LORD, and in teaching, with others. Last week Rev. John spoke of discipleship as a way of developing a strong youth program in this series on Faith Formation.

I was not a child when I went back to school last time – not even a young adult. But I have to say there was some strong teaching in seminary. My Hebrew professor took special interest in helping us with different learning methods. He told us to write our vocabulary and translations on big sheets of paper and hang it where we would see it first thing in the morning. He said if we read and spoke it when we first woke up we would retain it better because we would trick our brain into thinking reading backwards was normal for us - he was right. He also told us if we put it to music and made songs of memory work it would be easier to remember – true again.

I was very thankful to have him as a teacher - he had a big impact on my perseverance in my first year with his ‘strong teaching’. He took it very seriously also trying to prepare his students for whatever future God had mapped out for them – he cared. I shall always remember the Scripture he told me (sternly) never to forget, in Hebrew or in English – it is this:

In God I trust; I am not afraid; what can a mortal/human being do to me?
(Psalm 56: 12)

In my youth I received ‘strong teaching’ that connected me to God and therefore kept me connected to the church, connected even when I went to university in another town...because I wanted to worship God within a community.

What was your learning experience like when you were young and learning about God? Was it a good experience? What would you like it to be for the young people today?

It isn't easy to predict what will happen in each generation, what will happen in the home, in families, with friends or peers, what the social, political or economic climate will be like, what choices young people will make about lifestyles, or what the world will even look like, - it can seem like a tug of war will they stay in church, will they decide on something different? ...

I do believe, and statistics indicate, strong teaching is reinforced by a home life that encourages relationship with God in a loving way. Sometimes even with strong teaching in the home they are drawn away, and then we all need to pray that God will take it from there and they will have a sense of God's presence and it will lead to relationship with God.

In the Hemorrhaging Faith document (a study about why & when Canadian young adults are leaving, staying & returning to the church) there is a section called The Insights of the Think Tank. I read there, "Those who are found in the Wanderers and Rejecters categories report that they have never experienced the love of God and answered prayer."

That is sad. It breaks my heart ... and I have heard stories like it.

Is that because there has not been 'strong teaching', or is it because 'strong teaching' must be done in the right way?

Brené Brown, in *Daring Greatly*, records some advice she heard on Oprah from a writer named Toni Morrison:

It is interesting to watch what happens when a child walks into a room. She asked, "Does your face light up?" She explained, "When my children used to walk in the room when they were little, I looked at them to see if they had buckled their trousers or if their hair was combed or if their socks were up You think your affection and your deep love is on display because you're caring for them. It's not. When they see you, they see the critical face. *What's wrong now?*" Her advice was simple....she said, "Let your face speak what's in your heart. When they walk in the room my face says I'm glad to see them. It's just as small as that, you see?"(223 B. Brown)

What we say matters and what we do matters - Children imitate our words and our actions – if they do not match up teaching may leave an impression, but it is unlikely to be what we had hoped to teach.

In the course of conversation with my sister we talked about 'religious behavior' and its impact on many people turning away from being part of a church community – that is the negative side – sometimes judging others becomes a habit according to one's own religious practices...and it is tragic. ... But the positive side of religious practices is that it teaches us the things we need to know about what we believe and it reinforces our faith through the practice of

rituals that have come to have great meaning for the believer. If people do not understand the rituals that are important to our faith we should be able to explain why they have meaning for us, not throw them out.

The trials and tribulations of the world have not really changed – but the ‘strong teaching’ that came with Jesus added a new dimension: God with us, for “God so loved the world ...”

With infinite patience and ‘strong teaching’ Jesus took the time to answer a Pharisee who was a lawyer:

³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Matthew 22:36-40 NRSV

In the many recorded instances of Jesus healing people, no instance is recorded in which he simply waved his hand to immediately fix an ugly habit for one of his disciples. Instead, he simply kept teaching and correcting them, giving them time to grow – discipleship has always been about a process. (p.56 Verberg)

The trials and tribulations of the world have not really changed – but the ‘strong teaching’ that came with Jesus is the ‘strong teaching’ we need to carry on. If we want our children to have a faith that influences the way they live their lives, then we must lead by example. We do that by teaching them words they will believe because we believe, words that will encourage and refresh them in times that make them fearful – words like the *Shema*, and the *Lord’s Prayer*. ... Did you know the Lord’s Prayer is a summary of all the most important elements of the Jewish prayers to the LORD? ... in a simple and easy to understand form it could be memorized – it is simply brilliant – easy enough for a child to memorize and each petition would evoke an image for those who knew of the stories of God’s people and of his faithfulness.

The Apostle’s Creed is something we recite to affirm our faith to remind us of what we believe if we were challenged like the people Paul speaks of in 1Timothy – they are being challenged in their walk of faith by other myths – and Paul instructs Timothy that his actions must be in line with his teaching in order to hold weight.

In one of the Sunday services I was leading I asked a group of seniors for the “wisdom of the ages” in respect of Strong Teaching. There were many answers, but one I thought was worth repeating was this: “in teaching our children, we do the best we can with what we are given. None of us is perfect or has the perfect answer for everything – That is God’s department...” and I would add strong teaching is also strengthened/supplemented by community. We are not meant to do it alone – we do it by the Grace of God and in community (of faith).

There is a reason for strong teaching and religious practices: It is to equip us and our children and generations after generation so that we have a strong relationship with the LORD. When a person or people are in very difficult situations they often forget important information or actions, unless it is second nature because they have memorized it or practiced it. In times of trial or trauma people go to a default or instinct mode – but if they have memorized or practiced something, it becomes instinct response (and is readily available).

Just as the Jews had their religious practices to remind them of their relationship with God, so we have practices to remind us – practices that provide strong teaching: Baptism when one turns or returns to love the Lord, and joins the fellowship of believers, as we read in Acts; Communion - which we celebrate today – a remembrance of the love of God in Jesus Christ who was crucified willingly, to bring us into relationship with God.

All glory be to God, Father Son and Holy Spirit

Resources

Hemorrhaging Faith, why & when Canadian young adults are leaving, staying & returning to the church, by James Penner et al. hemorrhaging-faith-april-4-2013.pdf

Sitting at the Feet of Rabbi Jesus, how the Jewishness of Jesus can transform your faith, Ann Spangler & Lois Tverberg,(2009) Grand Rapids: Zondervan

Daring Greatly by Brene Brown (2012) New York: Avery

Scripture from the NRSV translation