

## **Honour The Child ~ As Gift & Teacher**

Sermon on 1 Samuel 1:1-20

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The gift of a child from God. Whether we have easily conceived the little one we receive, or yearned for years and all but lost hope, like Hannah and Elkanah, the birth of a child is awesome evidence of the Creator's generosity to us. Isn't each birth day a Christmas morning awakening? Each child a Christ light shining suddenly into our lives? Our instinctive response at birth is to pay homage to the babe, to come bearing gifts, to cuddle and adore. And so it should be. We are meant to honour children. The future of our world, the promise of the Kingdom on earth coming, depends on our doing so.

Raffi Cavoukian, the perennial Canadian children's songster, founded an organization called Child Honouring, based on his vision of healing the world by honouring children's needs. Raffi said: "The universal needs of our youngest citizens can help shape the world of their dreams, and ours...Why not?"

Scripture says that the little children will lead us, so when we take up our calling as parents and grandparents, godparents and mentors, sisters and brothers in Christ, we must be prepared to let our children teach us. We are spiritually challenged to let them show us what they need and what they feel, opening ourselves to receive their everyday lessons about loving and giving, about patience and compassion. One of my favourite parenting books, "Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting," by the Kabat-Zinns, describes the birth of a child as "an invitation to an 18-year-long spiritual retreat."

Maybe longer than 18 years, eh?

Even while they are still stretching mom's belly, our children begin stretching us spiritually. The conception of a baby often boosts parents' imaginations onto that other plane of consciousness, from which the child comes and to which we all return. The mystery of this baby's being can provoke us to contemplate the infinite.

And birth! The moment of birth is so many people's introduction to personal spiritual experience. The first incontrovertible evidence that there is something more, some shivery, awesome mysterious presence that touches down in our lives from time to time as pure love, bringing inexplicable joy. And from then on, our child is with us, their eyes offering us new lenses through which to see the fine details and the big picture of this world. Their uncensored voices will soon ask the big questions we had all but forgotten, about how and why we are in the world.

The United Church's new outreach campaign WonderCafe, includes a clever magazine ad with an image of a newborn, wearing a hospital ID bracelet printed with this message: **WARNING: some reassembly of priorities and beliefs may be required.**"

Perhaps some of our baptismal parents today have already experienced this spiritual challenge from their children? Are your priorities shifting? Are you wondering what you believe? Those questions, and your spiritual lessons from your little ones, have just begun!

When our child is born, we learn the art of meditating - on their fingers and toes.

We lose our grasp on linear time, like new lovers, lost for hours in baby's eyes. We give up the illusion of separateness, as our ego boundaries stretch to enfold this tiny 'other' - who is also part of us, as intimately attached as our own arms!

Perhaps we wonder: Is this how we rest in God's arms?

Parenting offers us so many opportunities to develop the spiritual practise of being present in the moment, immersed in watching her discover her thumb. And the spiritual practise of being fully present to the other: attentive and attuned to his needs and moods.

Parents lives today demand that we multi-task, making supper while overseeing playtime, answering the phone while pulling on pyjamas, but one of the spiritual stretches of parenting is to be truly present to each child, undivided in our attention, for some stretch of time each day. I always tried to do that at bedtime. It is kind of like practising sitting zen! But you can make up your own prayers to share.

As our children grow, from toddler tantrums to adolescent outrage, they frequently offer us a mirror through which we might see ourselves dimly indeed. Our reactions to their distresses challenge us to recognize where we need to heal and grow too. Their troubles and sorrows invite us to sooth our own, so that we can stretch our capacity for compassion. Our love for our children, and from them, is such an incentive to do all the inner work we need to do, in order to honour and stay close to them throughout the journey. We so want to accompany them in becoming all that God meant them to be. And in the process, lo and behold, perhaps they teach us how to be more than we ever thought we could be!

The spiritual journey of parenting - or any role that allows us to walk through life

beside a child - is a pilgrimage with steep challenges and lofty vantage points. But unto every parent, not just to Hannah and Elkanah, or Mary and Joseph, is born a personal prophet and child leader, a gift from God who is our teacher. And if we duly honour our children, they will lead us towards our God. And lead our world with their hope, into the Kingdom of Jesus, that is coming.