

A BALANCED HOME AND THE SIMPSONS

July 15, 1990

Luke 2:41-52

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One of my hobbies is making furniture. In most every piece of furniture that I have made, there is a mistake. All I can say is "thank God for wood putty." But when it comes to nurturing a child into a well-rounded adult, no amount of wood putty can cover up parental mistakes. Or, to use the image of a piece of lopsided pottery, we might wonder what contributed to a middle aged person's life being lopsided and unfulfilled? We just observe the family of orientation.

Most parents try their best to help their child grow into a well-rounded adult. However, a balanced adult has to come from a balanced home. Most everyone contributes to this process whether we are parents, grandparents, and even aunts and uncles. Many therapists use a "transgenerational" method of counseling. The therapist determines how the entire family system contributes to a particular family member's acting out. Bart Simpson, the character in the T.V. cartoon series was acting out of the family system in one episode when he stole the head of a beloved city statue. On the positive side, a balanced family system can create a well-rounded individual.

I. JESUS' FAMILY AND THE SIMPSONS

Luke tells about an incident that occurred in the life of Jesus when he was twelve years old. His parents took him to Jerusalem for Passover. After this experience, nothing is known about Jesus until he steps forth into his public ministry. Luke just summarizes those silent years like this, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." (2:52) We can deduct from this statement that Jesus' life unfolded into a well-balanced pattern.

His parents and extended family must have sought to understand Jesus, for scripture says Mary "kept all these things in her heart". They saw his life as a whole, with four facets--body, social nature, mind, and spirit. All four facets of his life grew together into a well-formed whole. My Chaplain supervisor said that Jesus was the only true human that has ever lived.

But, what if Mary and Joseph had viewed their child as being essentially body while ignoring the spirit? Jesus could have been a boy like Bart Simpson, "the world's greatest under-achiever and proud of it.". What if they had viewed him primarily as spirit? A kind of religious fanaticism can develop. The kind of fanaticism in which parents let their Child die because they don't believe in blood transfusions. Or, in the case of Christian fundamentalism, a child grows up understanding God as the "big Irish cop in the sky." Like Bart Simpson, they move from one crisis to another.

If you haven't seen any of the Simpson cartoon shows on Sunday night, you are probably aware this program has created a storm of protest. In Fremont, Ohio, an elementary school principal embargoed Bart Simpson T-shirts because the character sets an unhealthy example. Granted, this family resembles Ma Parker and her gang as opposed to Ozzie and Harriet and the Cosby family. However, it is insane to think that wearing Bart Simpson T-shirts is going to stunt our growth. We have personal authority figures who contribute to that.

II. A BALANCED HOME AND THE SIMPSONS

What makes for a balanced home? Let me suggest several things which I have struggled with as a parent.

A. First, there has to be a balance between love and justice. I have put love first because our Lord proclaimed that love is the essence of all our relationships. If we don't have love in our homes, we can't have justice that is fair and graceful.

Many of you are like myself, who grew up in a home with hard-working parents. Love was never directly mentioned. You were supposed to know that you were loved by what your parents did for you. I was a grown man before I was able to tell my father that I loved him or him, me. Now, whenever my dad calls, those are the last words he says to me before he hangs up the phone. It is though life is precious. Just in case we don't get to talk again in this world, I want to tell you "I love you." Now I feel comfortable sharing my feelings with my own children.

But love has a firm and stern side which saves it from being sentimental mush. That side is justice and the home is the place where we begin to learn about consequences of our behavior. In one of the Simpson family cartoons, the family is getting ready for Sunday School and church. Mom has to check every child to see if they are dressed properly. Bart is last for inspection. She just asks Bart to "assume the position." Bart has to spread eagle against a wall while she frisks him for foreign objects. How many parents and grandparents have had to confiscate a concealed water pistol before you took your child to Sunday School? They aren't happy about that.

We need to tell our children "no" so they can develop a sense of fairness. Philip Chard, in an article in the Milwaukee Sentinel, tells of a company employee who had been accused of sexual harassment and he convinced his boss to let him seek professional help. After counseling with him, Dr. Chard observed that, "He didn't give a rat's rump about anybody but ol' No. 1. He knew what he wanted-- sex, money, power-- and he was willing to slit anybody's throat but his own to get it." Dr. Chard didn't use any "psychobabble" to diagnose his problem. He said he was just "a jerk." He never learned about justice and fair play.

B. Second, there should be balance between privacy and social concern. Regardless of whether the home is a single parent or two parents with 2.2 children, it needs to be a haven from the stress of life. If a child or parent has a home to return to at the close of the day where he is loved and accepted, he can stand almost any kind of stress.

While being private, the home should not be insulated from the world. A child needs to learn social responsibility. A child needs to understand that we are our brother's keeper. I have observed many families in this church taking their children to serve in the St. Vincent meal program for the hungry. I admire these parents who refuse to put blinders on their children's eyes to keep them from seeing the suffering of others. Through this experience, they can learn to be their brother's keeper.

C. Third, a home requires a balance between security and risk. One of the most powerful drives in human beings is to gain a strong sense of security. Our children need to feel economically secure, with adequate shelter, food, and clothing. If not, they may become anxious. The Depression did this for many people of that generation.

But security has its dangers. There is a point in which security becomes overprotection. Few things are more stifling and crippling than for a child to be overly protected. Dr. Philip Chard told another story about a person he called Tim. It seems Tim learned a lot about life from his family of orientation. When he wanted to jump into mud puddles, his mother warned, "Don't get wet. You'll catch pneumonia." As an adolescent, he enjoyed sculpturing clay but his father warned that he should "learn something that will make money."

So he learned to only do what was safe. After obtaining his business degree, he married and obtained a steady job in a steady business. No more puddles or laughing in church. But Tim got anxiety; the kind that affected him with "headaches, gut aches and neck aches. Safe went sour." Tim facilitated his own healing when he went back to school to study something impractical. Now, he gets clay under his fingernails. He worries about money, but it doesn't run his life. He feels alive. There has to be balance between security and risk.

D. Fourth, there also needs to be a balance between work and play. Work in this case is any serious pursuit of a task whether it is working at McDonalds, or studying a difficult book. A child needs to know that any work, however menial, is good. There is virtue in the calloused hand and in the cultivated mind.

But a child needs relief from serious work. He or she needs to run, romp, have pajama parties and play with friends. Professor Wimberly of Garrett Seminary said in his class on family counseling that "children need to play." If they don't learn how to play, or play enough, they will have problems in adulthood. My father was the oldest child of an alcoholic father. This meant that at a young age much of the farm responsibility fell on his shoulders. There was very little time for play. So, as an adult, dad had difficulty relaxing when there was work to be done. At 58, dad had his first heart attack. Two years later he had another. Now he has to relax or else...There needs to be a balance between work and play.

E. Last, there needs to be a balance between the physical and spiritual. There is value in teaching our children that God's creation is good. The material world is not to be despised or it is "an evil principle" which was what the Gnostics thought. (Tillich, p.21) May our children know it is a worthy goal to seek to remain healthy, to use wealth properly and to care for the environment. But help them not to be the slave to things or to judge a man in terms of what they possess.

Yet, they will need to hold the material in balance with the spiritual. Mary and Joseph took their twelve-year old to Jerusalem for the Passover. They didn't send him or drop him off at the church and pick him up after it was over. He didn't go with the grandparents or other extended family. They went with him. The spiritual was a quest shared with their son.

CONCLUSION

My preaching professor, Dr. Chevis Horne told a story in one of his sermons about visiting an Amish family in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. In the family, he met a grandmother with two lovely grandchildren. He observed that while this lady was not formally educated, she was a very fine and intelligent person. Dr. Horne asked this Amish grandmother "what was her greatest hope for her grandchildren?" Her answer was quick and spontaneous, "I want them to know, love, and serve Jesus Christ." Funny, but I would have said that I hoped my children would be successful.

As a parent who looks back on the nurturing of my children, I have regrets. It is not easy to achieve a balanced home. It takes hard work, discipline, critical self-examination and love. It is worth the effort if you want to keep them from becoming a Bart Simpson.