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Ends and Means

1 Kings 11:9-11

We are talking about family dynamics this summer and today we explore the relationship between fathers and sons and to the greater understanding between parents and children. First, however, I begin with a clarification. I am not speaking about relationships that include abuse. Abuse in relationships takes us to a very different reality. I am well aware that a significant number of children in this country deal with neglect and abuse and I do not want to ignore that truth. As we look at the biblical story of King David and his son Solomon we consider the relationship between parents and children in more general terms.

David became the second King of Israel. He was intelligent, he was courageous and he was creative. He was musical, successful on the battlefield, charming, ambitious, and he was the perfect image of a king. David is the kind of man who gets what he wants and there comes a time when he wants Bathsheba. She is married, her husband is a soldier in David's army and yet King David is not interested in her circumstances. David sends for her and later finds she is pregnant with his child. David orders her husband Uriah to come back from the battlefield and assumes that Uriah will go home for the night, but he does not go home. So in an effort to avoid scandal, David makes sure that Uriah is killed in battle. David wants Bathsheba as his very own and is willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen. For him, the end justifies the means.

Solomon was one of the many children of King David. Solomon was much like his father. He was intelligent, courageous, creative, charming and ambitious. Solomon was the perfect image of a king and like his father; he, too, gets what he wants.

We are, all of us, a combination of the positives and the not so positives of our parents. We are in part a combination of their traits. And it does not matter how old you are, you carry in part the traits of your father and mother. Take a moment, close your eyes and reflect; remember some of the wonderful traits of your mother and then your father. In your personal situation, you may be thinking of a stepparent, or a single parent, or a grandparent, or the one who had the greatest influence on you.

Now, consider those not so positive traits.

We are in part a combination of those tendencies. There has been a moment in life for most of us when we have heard words come out of our own mouth that we swore as a child we would never say. You know what I mean, words that were used on us when we were children. Words like, "Because I said so" or "There is no way you are going to leave the house looking like that" or "not as long as this is my house."

They may not be near, but we can hear the words and see the actions of our parents coming to life in our own lives. When those words and actions are faithful, great! But what happens when they are not faithful words and actions?

There is a theology found in the Hebrew Scriptures that declares that the sins of the father are borne by the sons. I don't personally believe that we are bound by the sins of our parents, or that our children are bound by our sins, but I do think that there is within us the tendency to act as our parents have acted, be that for good or not so good.

Certainly, we carry the traits of our parents in our genes. We have also been shaped by their example as well. It is quite possible that we will act very much like those who have raised us and our children will quite possibly act like us. There may be rebellion and very different life choices, but underlying traits are often lived out generation to generation.

Solomon had many of the same traits as his father. However, David, who made terrible decisions leading to the death of the innocent Uriah, David who turned his back on God, later turned back to God. It is the prophet Nathan who calls David to repentance. Nathan's words inspire David to fall on his knees and seek restoration in his relationship with God. David pours out his heart to God in a prayer that is found in Psalm 51, a prayer that we prayed earlier in the service.

King David turned back to God. His son, King Solomon did not.

Both men were distracted by their power and their own desires, but it was David who turned back to God and was sustained in his life journey by God's blessings. Solomon on the other hand walked away from God and did not return.

We are not bound to the choices of our parents, but we are certainly influenced by them. The decisions we make are our own. We have been given free will and it is not too late to reflect on the choices we are making. We have been given free will and it is not too late to consider the ways our choices are influenced by those who have gone before us. We have been given free will and it is not too late to change our patterns of living. We live in denial when we as adults continue to blame our parents for the choices we have made. Influenced, yes; bound, no.

I knew a man in a congregation in California who was an orphan. He spent all of his childhood years growing up in an orphanage. To my knowledge, he had very little information about his parents. As a young adult, he lived in exotic places around the globe. Now, long retired, he was helping me with a project one day at the church and came up with a great idea. I said to him, "How did you get so creative?" His response surprised me. He didn't tell me that his years in the orphanage or his years of traveling spurred his creativity, no, he replied, "Oh, that comes from my parents." I said, "Your parents? Why do you say that?" He then told me that all his good traits came from his parents and his negative traits he learned on his own. I thought it was such a generous thing to say. He, who might have been very bitter about his parents, was completely generous when he spoke of the parents he had never really known.

The choices we make as adults are our own and as focused as we may be on the various things we want to accomplish in our life, it is the journey that matters the most. It is the means by

which we live that shape us. It is the choices that we make day after day after day that shape our character and our life journey.

I was so sorry to hear about the death of journalist Tim Russert on Friday. I am not much of a celebrity watcher, but I have long appreciated Tim Russert and his death is a shock. I had planned to quote from Russert's book, "Big Russ and Me" this morning. Instead, I would just say that Russert seemed clear about his father's positive attributes and tried to live out those traits himself. He spoke very lovingly about the values his father taught him. They shared values from their faith tradition and incorporated those values into their daily decision-making. In a review by Charles Williams about Russert's book, the book is described as "the lessons of living an honest, disciplined and ethical life." These life lessons were taught to Tim Russert by his father, Tim Russert, Sr. an Irish Catholic who was a blue-collar worker with two jobs and raised four children.

We are never too old to consider the journey of faith that we are living.

David and Solomon were in many ways great leaders for Israel. But they also shared a sense of entitlement and the philosophy that the end justified the means by which the end was attained. For people of faith, the end is ultimately eternal life with God, but it is the means by which we journey that will take us to that end. When we consider the life we are living, it is all about the means. It is all about the choices we make, the words we share, and the actions we take. The means are the choices we are making as we live out our days, the person we are becoming, and the disciple we are becoming in Christ.

I read an article this week in a denominational publication that contained these words: "To act regularly as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must think regularly as disciples of Jesus Christ."
(Geneva, Illinois- William Obalil)

The struggle for us is that much of what we have learned in this culture has taught us that it is the ends that matter most. The means are often overlooked. Solomon learned from his father that power affords the vehicle of getting or taking whatever the king desires. As David's power overwhelmed his virtue he became corrupt and created a breach in his love relationship with God. He fell to his knees and begged for God's mercy. Solomon, however, makes similar choices as his father, but he does not turn back to God. He sets out as a devoted believer, but over time his choices become more and more self-centered. The father and son share the same traits, but live them out differently.

We all have ends that we wish to achieve. We all have things we wish to happen; dreams we hope to make true; a life we want to build. Life with God is a life that continues to unfold with possibilities for as long as we have life within us. The end: eternal life with God. The journey: the love relationship with God each and every day.

Last Sunday, a best selling book was recommended to me. I had not heard about it, but I picked it up this week and I would love to share a piece of it with you. The book is entitled "The Shack" by William P. Young and it is a story about a man who spends a weekend with God in a shack. This conversation about faith takes place near the end of the book. The main character Mackenzie is speaking to God and says "But you gotta admit, rules and principles are simpler than relationships."

(God) “It is true that relationships are a whole lot messier than rules, but rules will never give you answers to the deep questions of the heart and they will never love you.”

Dipping his hand in the water, he (Mackenzie) played, watching the patterns his movements made. “I’m realizing how few answers I have...to anything. You know, you’ve turned me upside down or inside out or something.”

“Mackenzie, religion is about having the right answers, and some of their answers are right. But I am about the process that takes you to the *living answer* and once you get to him, he will change you from the inside. There are a lot of smart people who are able to say a lot of right things from their brain because they have been told what the right answers are, but they don’t know me at all.

“I understand what you’re saying. I did that for years after seminary. I had the right answers, sometimes, but I didn’t know you. This weekend, sharing life with you has been far more illuminating than any of those answers. So, will I see you again?”

“Of course. You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa’s goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the Bible in fresh ways. Just don’t look for rules and principles; look for relationship....”

“It still won’t be the same as having you sit on the bow of my boat.”

“No, it will be far better than you’ve yet known, Mackenzie. And when you finally sleep in this world, we’ll have an eternity together – face-to-face.”

It is imperative that we understand that the journey, the day, to day, to day, to day journey is what is truly important in this life. The greatest gift a father or mother, or grandparent can give a child is not the rules and regulations of religion, but the example of a love relationship with God. Our gift to our children is a life based on listening to God, leaning into God, and living into God’s love. As people of faith, the gift we give our children is the example we offer as we pay particular attention to the means by which we live, to setting our faith relationship with God as our priority of our living, to the attention we place in study and service in Christ, to living our lives in ways that are just and righteous, to the ways we treat others, to the words we use in our home, in our workplace, in our neighborhood, to the comfort we offer as we encounter suffering in this world, to the compassion we offer to the stranger in need, and to the opportunities we find to offer hope and encouragement in the name of Jesus.

The means that lead us to our ultimate end are the values and virtues of our love relationship with God. Our lives are completely shaped by the choices we make each and every day. It is never too late to start fresh. It is never too late to fall on our knees, turn our hearts to our God and live anew in God’s forgiveness and grace.

Our God in heaven is our perfect parent who yearns to hear from us this Father’s Day and every day.