

There has been much on my internet feed lately about raising moral children. One of the latest was an article from the LA Times entitled [“How Secular Family Values Stack Up”](#). The article talks about children being raised by parents who have no religious affiliation and how that impacts the children’s moral development. I was prepared to read that these completely “secular” children are deficit when it comes to some part of their moral development....but that’s not the case according to this article.

I believe we all want our religious teachings to children to help shape and form their lives....and they do. But articles like these bring up two questions:

1. Is it the task of Christian education to teach morality?
2. If that is NOT the task, then what roles does Christian education have in the lives of our kids?

First, I believe the primary reason we teach children about God is to give them the assurance that they are never alone and that they are beloved to this divine creator. We teach them about Jesus because we believe that Jesus’ life was one we want them to know about and because, as Christians, we believe our salvation comes from our belief that Jesus is the son of God. We believe it was Jesus’ death and resurrection that gives us eternal life. We teach children about the Holy Spirit so they learn that God’s spirit continues to work today...to make us strong, to remind us that we’re called to be followers of Jesus.

I do not believe, ever, in using children’s behavior as a reason God would be angry with them. God does not stop loving any of us because our behavior is not moral. I’ve often said to kids that we bring joy to our parents, our friends and our God when we are kind or generous. But I would never say to a child, “If you are not kind or generous, God thinks you’re bad...or God doesn’t love you...or you don’t bring God joy.” We don’t teach morality, we teach love and grace. When we teach those things, moral behavior often follows...but not always.

Question 2: So what is the role of Christian education in the lives of our kids? In addition to the assurance of God’s presence, we also have the rich and caring model of the community of faith. Christian education allows children to wonder about difficult Bible stories, to connect their faith to struggles in their young lives. It allows them to do this surrounded by people who care about them, who believe in ways they do and who model the unconditional love of Jesus.

I’m also a firm believer in our children learning the stories of their faith and struggling with how those stories connect with their lives. We encourage kids to ask question about everything. We don’t pretend we know all the answers to everything in the Bible, because we don’t. And if we lie about that, one day they’ll figure it out and will perhaps wonder what else we may have lied about in our faith.

Finally, do I believe it’s a good thing to raise children without Christian or other religious values? No, I don’t. It would not be my choice. But I do recognize that there are MANY Christians who teach their children that they have the ONLY path to God and that everyone else is wrong. I don’t believe that and I think it sets kids up to be harsh and angry in their defense of their faith. Children need to know what their faith stands for, but they also need to learn that the faith of other people is equally valid. We don’t have the corner on God. People have been worshipping God since the beginning of time. And they’ve

done it in diverse and remarkable ways. Forever, people have been comforted by God's presence and in awe of God's divinity. That happened LONG before Jesus was born.

As Christians, we claim Jesus as our Savior. I love that. But I also rejoice with the faithful Muslim teen who explained to me that she was ready to fast for the first time for Ramadan and the young Jewish boy who invited me to his bar mitzvah, telling me how hard he's worked on his Hebrew to read Torah. One of my favorite New Testament scholars, Marcus Borg, died recently. He helped me SO much in understanding how I could be passionate about my relationship with Christ and still accept and respect people who had different traditions. He said, "To be Christian means to find the decisive revelation of God in Jesus. To be Muslim means to find the decisive revelation of God in the Koran. To be Jewish means to find the decisive revelation of God in Torah, and so forth.... To be Christian in this kind of context means to be deeply committed to one's own tradition even as one recognizes the validity of other traditions."

This is where so many secular parents find comfort. They believe the church demands them to be narrow in teaching and beliefs, and judgmental about people who believe differently. And they don't want that for their children. They want their children to be able to accept many different kinds of people. The church has often failed to help them teach that. So they have left the church and teach their morality from outside the Christian community of faith. Most parents say that they begin with what we call the "Golden Rule"...do unto others what you want them to do to you. In ancient times it was known as an "ethic of reciprocity". Rushworth Kidder, scholar and author of Good Kids, Tough Choices: How parents can help their kids to the right thing, notes that the ethic of reciprocity has been found in early Confucianism, in Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism, as well as any other religion he's studied.

So what about us...the Christian parents? How do we help our children live faithfully, solid in our beliefs, while still accepting other people? I think we keep pointing to Jesus. Pretty basic, but there it is. Jesus had an ability to accept, and celebrate diverse kinds of people. So can we, and so can our kids. Should we apologize for our faith, our belief in Jesus? Never. Instead, let's teach our children how Jesus lived and figure out if we can live in any of those ways. Let's remind our kids that God created them, loves them and stays with them....no matter what. Then, let's do the hard work of being adults who lived like Jesus lived....our kids will watch and learn and grow with us. It's not an easy journey, but it's certainly worth the walk!

-Pastor Brenda