

Theology for Parents:

**Discussing God, Meaning and Morality --
Even on the Run**

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Introduction and Invitation:

Among the most rewarding, exciting and challenging things that I get to do is talk about God with kids. I love to do this in my own family, and for over two decades in the church I've conversed with hundreds of kids from many families, of many faiths. Most of the best conversations do not take place in a sanctuary, though. They come up in the minivan, at breakfast, bedtime and on the playground. And why not: that's where kids live in our culture.

A question about God can start out as a question about rules in a game or injustice in a playroom. It can begin with concern for a sick or dying pet. It can focus on divorce or the loss of a parent, on nightmares or on the diversity that we enjoy in our communities and culture. Or it can begin because kids are uniquely open to mystery and particularly attuned both to joy and to hope. It can have something to do with creation, or even just a bad cut that needs a band-aid. Or it can come direct from the depths, for example "Does God help when I'm afraid?"

These questions offer opportunities to share theology: our beliefs, personal, traditional, collective and creative, about the who and what and when of God, as well as the why. Some questions can be answered, others discussed, and some left as they are: questions. Frankly, that's honest to the most complex theology of our history and day. We know some things, suspect others and will likely never know others. But what a joy to take that journey together!

This resource is to find strength, companionship (that means sharing bread...), and resources for the journey. Because what we say and do with kids in every stage of development has everything to do with how they will deepen their own approach to God and the world and themselves and each other. And the resource, the grounding, the gift of faith is deep and wide and eternal.

I invite you to pursue this journey with your own family, as well as your family in what we still call the Body of Christ. Yet these materials are intended for blended families, too: Jewish-Christian, Buddhist-Christian, and so on. Hard to believe? Read on!

Background:

In January, 2007 a number of families in the Newton Highlands Congregational Church met together to discuss questions about God and talking about God in their own homes. We met to share ideas, theories, questions and practices.

At that time we intended to meet again, at least once. Snow storms, illnesses and scheduling problems kept us apart. This resource is to follow-up on that effort, and inspire another gathering.

Personal Story:

I was driving in Boston with my daughter one day. We were test driving a car. We stopped at a red light and a man stood there with a sign asking for help and food. My daughter asked me to read the sign to her, and I did. Then she said that in church we talk about helping people all the time, and asked what I was going to do. What would you do?

Basic Ideas and Assumptions:

When our parents' group met we discussed talking about God, and faith, in a family of any faith. We offered basic ideas, as well as Christian claims. We began with several assumptions:

- Even if you never said anything about God in your family, kids will encounter this idea and topic in community and culture. Questions about God are out there.
- Being a parent or family member responding to questions draws a great deal on what *you* heard as a child, and how you offer or avoid that.
- The same is true based on what you now believe: what you teach kids will have everything to do with your adult formulation, articulation, action and intention in faith.
- Kids are smart and savvy. They are amazingly perceptive. They learn fast! They also learn in different ways (based on visual, auditory or kinesthetic lessons...) and they move through different development stages.

Those assumptions and more lead to lots of opportunities.

How grown-ups Teach, and kids Learn:

Several specialists have simple ideas for how to teach kids, and the ways that they will learn, whether we intend for it to happen or not!

Berry Brazelton says that sharing faith has everything to do with **modeling**: speaking but moreover acting.

Peg Post says that faith is **contagious**: it's caught, not taught. So we do well to be deliberate, sincere and never artificial.

Erwin Miller says **don't** try to **explain everything**. You can't. Explain what you can.

Harold Kushner adds that it is fine to say, We **don't know every answer**, even as adults.

Jean Piaget says that kids questions are **functional**, not theoretical; they ask to discern meaning for their personal lives, not distant ideas. (Listen to their questions...)

Jesus says "Let the children come to me, for to such belongs the realm of heaven."

How to teach to each stage of life:

From the ideas above, we learn a lot. For example, what we can teach, at each stage of life. Here is what comes through, among other things:

Pre-speech: Love, care acceptance, consistency, patience...

Pre-school: Routines (disciplines?!), wonder, comfort, singing, prayer...

Age 5/6 on: Concepts engaging fairness, forgiveness, mystery, awe, sorrow, joy, and practice...

Older kids: Intellectual rigor and integrity, justice, outreach, morals, conversation with science¹, metaphor...

Personal Story:

My daughter had a fish that died. It lived a good life, for a fish, and when life was complete we took it to the garden and buried it together. Then she asked Santa for a fish for Christmas, and on Christmas Eve a new fish appeared in her bedroom as she slept: one that looked a great deal like the first. Christmas morning she awoke and squealed: "Mom, Dad, Santa brought my fish back to life!" What do you say next?

¹ Here is a great idea from Harold Kushner, that puts its finger on just what we're doing as people of faith, with kids and others. He writes, "Science can define what it means to be *Homo Sapiens*; religion can envision what it means to be authentically human." That's at the heart of teaching and talking about God.

Who is the God that we are teaching about?

What is the ground our own adult faith?

This is such an essential question: What do *we* believe? We may still be on a journey, which is good. We may have a variety of beliefs, hard to synthesize or express in a phrase or two. But this is a great exercise: try to write down in one or two sentences the core of your faith. Of course it won't be comprehensive, but great thinkers (just like you) have often done this. Karl Barth, among the top Christian theologians of the twentieth century, once told a Yale lecture audience that, after multiple volumes, he could sum up his faith this way: "*Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" It still makes learned theologians angry to quote that, but it's not bad, for a start.

Consider two definitions of God from Harold Kushner to inspire your thoughts:

"God is the name that we attach to the fact that we find certain things possible and meaningful in the world and in our lives and the fact that we find ourselves stirred to move in the direction of realizing these possibilities. We call God the force behind our growing and learning, our curiosity to discover and our impulse to share and to help."

And,

"If we understand God to mean the power that makes us feel in certain ways, the Spirit that causes us to know what Love and Hope and Compassion are like at all those moments when our spirits are in tune with the spirit of the universe, then we can believe that God is real -- because we know that Love and Hope and Compassion are real."

Paul Tillich made it simpler in some ways. He called God our *ultimate*. Perhaps his most famous phrase calls God our "*ultimate concern.*" But ponder that idea, that God is ultimate, in all creation. Is that what you believe? Is there a way to express that to children?

How do adults think about God?

How do we adults talk about God now? Is God a person or thing? Is God a stranger? Is God meaningful, distant, "blamed," intimate? Do we speak of the "*where*" of God, or the "*when*" of God? Do we use metaphor, and then need to correct ourselves later? Does our image of God grow, allowing for kids also to grow through stages? Are we imaginative? What are our questions?

How do we talk about humankind now? What is our image of it? Are we hopeful, pessimistic? Do we focus on blessings or flaws, common ground or distinctions? What do we think of diversity, or "the image of God?" How does that influence our guidance and response?

When do you talk about God? When might you?

Henry Cohen, a rabbi, offers another image of why God is important, and how God is connected to growth and love and tomorrow:

*“God will be with you as you grow from a child to a man
(or woman), for God is the Power that makes for growth.*

God will be with you as you grow emotionally, from an infant who thinks primarily of his own pleasure, to a truly human being who somehow comes to care about the needs of others, for God is the Power that makes for love.

*God will be with you as your own mind grows in wisdom,
as you come to understand more about yourself and your
world, for God is the Power that makes for the clear use of reason.*

*God will be with you when, after days of anxiety and confusion,
the dawn breaks and suddenly you see where you are going,
for God is the Power that makes for a better tomorrow.”*

Personal Story:

I was standing outside my church in Western Massachusetts one day, shaking hands after worship. I was wearing my Geneva gown, which is that big black one that shows up in academic processions. The wind was blowing, and the gown was flowing. One of my favorite members, a single mom with a great five year old, came by and he looked up at me and pointed, and his eyes widened and his jaw dropped and he exclaimed, “Look mom, it’s *Batman!*” This kid was around church a lot, and knew me out of my robe well. But we have to remember that all the stories we tell, all the symbols we use, all the lessons we share, may still be seen through the kids’ own screen and reference points, and it doesn’t hurt to watch for those, if we want to communicate well.

We end where we began:

Home/family is where the primary work of faith formation takes place, and it is work. Faith communities guide, resource and empower parents and families with ideas... Indeed,

“One of the chief purposes of congregational worship is to strengthen the feeling of being part of a congregation. At public services, we bring people together who share the same values and purposes... In a congregation people renew dedication to their purposes, (including) reassurance that we are not alone, that many other people feel as (we do) about the world and what it might become.”

-- Harold Kushner

What difference does all this make?

“When people stop believing in God the trouble is not that they thereafter believe in nothing, but that they believe in anything.” -- Bill Coffin

All of us want our kids (and our world) to be protected from believing “in anything.” We want our kids to have the values, resources and gifts that come from God, who we know in community. As a reminder, this takes more than an hour on Sunday, or a visit to church school here and there. That is not meant to induce guilt, but to note that when our faith is not a constant in our family, we yield to the huge influences of time spent with the media, with a truly violent culture, and without the touch of mystery, majesty and meaning that comes from God.

Now, *How can you spend more time with God?*

First, regular prayer can be quite simple. Meal time and bed time are logical times. You don't need to speak in King James English, or tough every base. An old guideline says that great prayers can reflect the letters of the book of ACTS: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication. OK: that doesn't sound so clear! What it means is ponder God's wonder (adoration), reflect on what is not perfect or perhaps broken in your world (contrition), then thanksgiving is at the heart of all prayer, whether it is for family, pets, sunny days or ice cream, and, supplication means ask for what you need. God, my sister has a cold and we hope she feels better. God, give us peace. God, help me to sleep well tonight, and let my night light remind me that you are always with me. Prayer is one way to spend time with God.

*Dear God, thank you for today. Your world is so amazing,
and we are having such a good time this summer.
Help us always to be friendly, and not have arguments.
Watch over me all night long, and keep close,
especially close to my mom, while her arm gets better.
Thank you God and Jesus; Amen.*

Second, another way to spend time is to include God in family reflections. Was the beach beautiful this summer? Is the snowfall amazing? Doesn't cuddling by the TV with a blanket and a hug feel great? God has something to do with creation and comfort and all that we experience, and we can mention that. Just simply include God in your wonder and joy, as well as times of need.

Third, another way to spend time with God is to take built in activities and include some theological content. Do you enjoy DVDs? Do you listen to music? Do you read books, or play on the web? Consider some Christian content.

Let me say, that in that category there is a lot of drek. There is a lot of drek in the secular category, too, so that is no surprise. And this is not meant as a comprehensive list, but a pump primer with two or three ideas:

Explore Veggie Tales. Visit www.bigideafun.com, or go to a DVD seller for numerous half hour expositions of Biblical books. They are a touch on the conservative side at times (God is always “he”) but their content is first rate. Make them part of your entertainment time, if you use video.

Put some books on the shelf as part of your regular routine. These are just a few of my favorites, with great content, exposition and message:

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God's Name*. Wonderful! Great theology and pictures.

Nancy Sohn Swartz, *In Our Image: God's First Creatures*. Inclusive creation story, celebrating God -- first rate.

Children's Bibles can be hard to choose: too complex, too silly... Pictures can help. Consider Tomie dePaola *Book of Bible Stories*. It is the NIV translation, with good illustrations, for perhaps six and up.

Tomie DePaola, *Pascual and the Kitchen Angels*. A nice model, and good images that assume God is part of the story, even if you are a foodie.

Douglas Wood, *Old Turtle*. A new classic on relationship, self-understanding, and the timeless beyond that is God, not us.

Jon J. Muth, *The Three Questions*. A bit of philosophy, based on Tolstoy, with a story to ask us what is important. It's not overtly God-centered, but comfortably Christian.

Here are a few books for older teens or parents. Again, just a few ideas.

Dorothy Bass, Ed, *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. For them to read, or you together. Even connects to good websites.

Bill Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*. Meant for a college student, but totally appropriate for mid or late teens.

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*. It doesn't explain it all, but it's a great start for the grown up.

Marva Dawn, *Is it a Lost Cause*, in which she argues that parents' best resource is time. Now, you've already heard her conclusion: go share some!

Harold Kushner, *When Children Ask about God*. Old, but totally helpful. Filled with wisdom and insight.

David Heller, *Dear God: Children's Letters to God*. There are several books like this: for a laugh, that lingers.

Now, what is going on in your life/family!?

What are you hearing?

What are you doing?

What are you wishing?

What is working?

What is failing?

Are the ideas presented here too middle-class, and not, for example, realistic for the poor?

What do you need?

I did not intend to offer the whole course and the entire bibliography in one paper, but to put forth some resources from which you can find two or three that help you. After you read, call, write, email and ask more; or share your best resource, and we'll get it on the list.

In conclusion, not summary, it is so important to return to the beginning of the Biblical story, where God repeatedly saw that the divine creation was good. To extrapolate, your children were created good. Your family is good, in God's eyes. Perfect means "finished," so I don't assume that your family is perfect! I assume it is good.

In that same text we can find also this message: we are all human *beings* not human *doings*. We are not known by what we do, but by what we are. We are God's.

Taking all this together I presume that we are all on a journey in faith. Indeed, Jesus followers were first called "The Way." Along that journey I pray that you find time, resources, community and prayerful voice to grow wise in your own faith, and share it with kids who are wise -- often already -- in the ways of God. Listen to their questions. Share your answers. And respect that mystery and the unknown will always remain. That's good theology.