

In the week leading up to Mother’s Day, the columnist Ask Amy, published two letters from parents who were not at their best. There was the mom who was disappointed in her adult son who had gotten a DUI, then violated probation and was going to have to go to jail. Her children had been her life’s work, and now she was feeling as if his failure was hers. And then there was the dad whose daughter was making bad choices. When he tried to tell her what to do, she told him off, and now he doesn’t want to reward her disrespect by attending her college graduation.

None of the parents in this room would ever do anything like this, right? But all of us parents have had problems and faced enough family crises to question our faith in our heavenly Parent.

When we are in trouble, we wonder: where can we turn?

I’d like to say the Bible, but Old Testament parents are no help. Adam couldn’t put a stop to the deadly rivalry between Cain and Abel. Jacob’s blatant favoritism was almost lethal to his son, Joseph.

Jephthah sacrificed his own daughter [Judges 11]. As a parent, King David was a failure. He neglected to punish one of his sons for raping one of his daughters. And he couldn't prevent another son from trying to usurp his throne and getting killed in the process.

Things aren't much better in the New Testament, primarily because the major players weren't parents that we know of. If the disciples had children, they abandoned them to follow Jesus, who was childless himself. Maybe that's why he had a soft heart for children. The Apostle Paul was also celibate, because he thought the world was ending soon, so there was no point in getting married and having a family. Fast forward a few thousand years. In this world that has not ended yet, how are we supposed to know how God wants us to raise our kids?

What is known as the "Farewell Discourse" in the Gospel of John may provide us with some guidance. Chapters 14-17 give us the last speech of Jesus on his last night with his disciples. He knows what is coming and that he soon will be going. He has done all

he can do. As for the disciples, he has tried to train them up right, but now he has to let them go it alone. Here is Jesus talking like a soon-to-be empty-nester, except that his disciples aren't leaving home; he is. And so, on this Ascension Sunday, I read his parting advice to the disciples, looking for parenting advice for us and some quotable parental advice for our children. As Hank and I get ready to celebrate Kristen's graduation, I realize that all three of us are graduating, in a sense, going on to a new phase in our lives. So let this be my "Biblical Baccalaureate" sermon. Don't worry if it's been a long, long time since you or your children graduated. Jesus' advice for this life, is good for the next one, too.

Chapter 17 begins this way:

After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do."

Jesus begins his "High Priestly Prayer," as they call it, with God's intention to give us eternal life, and that should elevate our parental

intentions, too. We give our daughters and sons life, but we want to give them something more than mere existence. We hope that what we give them will help them live life to its fullest. But while God has eternity to do it, we don't. The hard work and heart work of being a mom or a dad only seems eternal, but the hour will come when parents have to realize that they have finished the work of raising their children. Jesus raised his disciples for three years. It takes us a bit longer. Still, there is a limited time in which our children are trainable.

The important question is: what do we do with that time? For eighteen or so years, we pour a ton of our energy into our kids, and we can only pray that we are glorifying our heavenly Parent in the process. But we are always wondering: are we giving them what they truly need? Lord knows that we give them all kinds of things they don't really need. Jesus gave his disciples just what they needed. The first thing he said was: "I have made your name known

to those whom you gave me....” And he added this: “the words that you gave to me I have given to them....”

Now I know that I have given Kristen some things she didn't need to have, words she didn't need to hear, habits she didn't need to learn. If you ask her, I'm sure she would be glad to tell you what they are. But with the bad things came lots of good things, too. I just want her to know that the good that she thinks she got from me or from her dad is really from God. I hope that, by talking at the dinner table and dragging her to church, Hank and I have made God's name known to her. Even if she doesn't call on that name so much now, I pray that she will remember it when she discovers that she needs it. I raised a PK, so when she gets to college, I don't expect her to be in Church every Sunday. But I want her to remember the love she received from all the saints that she met here.

When parents are part of a community of faith, they can be sure that they are making *the name* of God known for their children, but that isn't quite the same as making *God* known to them. Jesus says

that knowing God and God's Son is the same as having eternal life. I wish I could just give Kristen that knowledge. But that's not a gift that a parent can give. That's a reality she will have to live. If eternal life is knowing God, then we can start to live it right here, but our children will have to choose it for themselves.

Trying to live by eternal values; seeking eternal truth; sometimes falling down and then being lifted up by eternal strength; getting hurt or losing hope, and then being revived and renewed by eternal love—I can't give Kristen these experiences. Letting our children live their own lives is the only way we can help them know God and experience eternal life.

In the age of helicopter parenting, that is harder than it sounds. The stakes are so high, the margin of error so slim, that we try to do everything we can to fashion a no-fail childhood for our kids. Aside from the psychological damage we may be doing, there is the spiritual damage. How will they get to know God if we don't let them live their life?

We're so afraid to send them out into a world that is so messed up. As we are reminded every day, the world does not live by God's rules. The system does not conform to God's justice. Life here in Silicon Valley does not cultivate Christian virtues nor does it instill Christian values.

It wasn't so very different long ago in the Jordan River Valley. Jesus said, "I do not belong to this world." And he wasn't kidding. His ethic of loving and giving was out of this world. So what can we parents do who are worried that our kids are going to get corrupted by the world we are preparing them for? We can prepare them to demand a different world.

Jesus said that his disciples didn't belong to the world, either. They had to live *in* it, but they didn't have to live *by* it. If we want our children to know God, then we as parents can't give into and live by the values of this world. We shouldn't be training our kids to be well-adjusted to a world that is full of injustice. Jesus wanted his disciples to be mal-adjusted to injustice. So we parents should be

modeling for our children how to work together to make the system look a bit more like God's kingdom.

Even then, it's hard letting them go. Just like Jesus who had to let his disciples live their lives, we know the hard truths our children are going to have to learn and the dangers they will have to face. Unlike Jesus, we also know the sacrifices we *weren't* willing to make and the compromises we felt that we *had* to make. All the more reason to do what Jesus did: pray.

Jesus prayed, "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one." We might as well stop pretending that we can do the protecting. Even Jesus had to give it over to God. He didn't ask God to take them up into heaven with him. He didn't ask God to save them from the struggle. As people of faith, we need to remember this prayer of Jesus so that, despite all the dangers, toils and snares of being a Christian and raising children in the world today, we may have his joy made complete in us. [John 17:13]



We need to look to Jesus until we figure out that there is no way to God that doesn't go through grace. There is no way to learn to trust that doesn't involve a test. And there is no getting to eternal life without risking everything on fully living this one.

Whether we are a parent or not, whether our kid is graduating or not, it is commencement time. God is beginning again with each one of us. We are a new creation every day. Just as Jesus was on his way to God, so are we.

So I will send you out with some words that I give to all of our graduating seniors. This advice is from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*. It was given to me by my home church pastor when I was going off to college long ago, and I pass it on to you:

“Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

[Bob plays a few bars of Pomp and Circumstance]