



Parenting in the Pandemic: Spiritual Growth in Trying Times

By Todd Bowman, PhD

As we reflect on what 2020 has offered us, I am quite convinced the vast majority of us can confidently say, “I didn’t see it coming.” The spiritually and emotionally taxing moments we have encountered in this year are diverse and multifaceted. Here is what we’ve experienced:

- A global pandemic
- Panic buying
- Racial discord
- Political tensions
- Financial strain
- Violence
- Virtual schooling

In some ways, the truly ugly parts of 2020 all serve a similar function: they have shattered our sense of security and exposed some of the painful realities that we have needed to confront for a long time. Added into the mix are the challenges of parenting children through this turmoil, which can make us feel downright overwhelmed.

Overwhelmed Parents

When I think about the challenges and responsibilities of parenting in this context, there are many that catch our attention:

- teaching our kids new social practices to prevent the spread of disease
- helping them navigate the change in schooling
- providing them with opportunities to express their fears and concerns
- creating a sense of normalcy and predictability in a world of chaos
- helping them not lose hope of a better future

Navigating through these life adjustments can be important shaping moments for our children. They can help foster a sense of resilience and identity. They also can become a pathway in which they can mature emotionally and spiritually.

Through the Eyes of Children

While we as parents have been busy juggling many competing demands in an effort to maintain some semblance of control over our lives, it is safe to say that our children have been suffering in both observable and unobservable ways. Their suffering includes the loss of connection to school friends and sporting activities; the missed milestone moments such as graduation and prom; the loss of loved ones; the loss of a sense of security; the loss of predictability afforded by the schooling environment. We, as parents, need to address their sense of loss, pain, fear, and even despair to help them keep their experiences in perspective. In this regard, a helpful Scripture passage comes to mind (Romans 5:3-5). The Apostle Paul writes:

...but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Here is an invitation to begin to name and acknowledge the suffering we all are experiencing. By bringing these things to light, we get a better grasp of the psychological and spiritual needs of our kids and can offer conversations about the nature of perseverance, character, and, perhaps most importantly, hope. We all need to be reminded that God is faithful and His love endures forever. We need to remember that we are called to be a holy people even in the midst of trying and uncertain times. These are indispensable truths to cling to as we endure an unknown future.

Contentment in Adversity

Another opportunity we've inherited from this difficult time is that we can discuss the nature of Christian contentment with our children. This is not a contentment reliant upon what we possess materially but rather a contentment that emerges from our faith. Paul describes it in Philippians 4:11-14.

I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength. Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles.

These days, we are facing many needs, such as the need for human interaction and human touch; the need for financial stability so our basic needs are met; the need to understand and express our emotions; and the need to belong to a social group where we are valued, chosen, and accepted. These all are legitimate human needs. However, Paul offers us more in this passage. Even though we tend to stop after reading "I can do all this through him who gives me strength," the next sentence puts Christian contentment into a fuller context that "It was good of you to share in my troubles."

Sharing in the Suffering of Others

Even if we are financially, emotionally, and socially comfortable at this time, we need to be a model of God's mercy, charity, and love by sharing in the suffering of others. These acts of sharing can be as simple as taking a meal to someone afflicted with COVID-19 or reaching out and checking in on our friends and neighbors. Our children are constantly looking for clues from us about how to respond to the challenges that confront everyone at this time. Our actions of love and mercy answer their quest. I pray that as the Body of Christ we embody the true meaning of the word "community" and that our kids will sense the smile of Christ as we together minister to those hurting and afflicted.

None of us can do it all. However, what we all can do is share what we have with those who are struggling around us. By sharing with those who are struggling, we show them the love of Christ while exhibiting the same to our children. And by God's grace, we can have the assurance that whatever we offer, no matter how great or small, God will bless it.