

God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be moved and the mountains carried into the sea. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

1 These are the commands, decrees and laws the LORD your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, 2 so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the LORD your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. 3 Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.

4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. 6 These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. 7 Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. 8 Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. 9 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

At one time or another every parent has wondered, "What is the best gift I can give my child?" Some say it is a "well-rounded education." If it is, then we make special efforts to live in a community with good schools, to provide music lessons and sports opportunities, as well as a variety of other activities. Others say the best gift we can give our children is a "happy childhood." If it is, then we make special efforts to spend quality time with our children. We provide a home with a minimum of conflict, and we plan memorable family activities and vacations.

But are those really the best gifts we can give our children? I suggest we can give more than a well-rounded education and a happy childhood -- important as these things are. We know from the Bible that the greatest gift we can give our children is the knowledge that Jesus is our Savior.

No problem, right? Just give them Jesus. But there is a problem. It is easy for us to think of religious education in the same way we think of childhood immunizations -- a one-time "shot" or a series of "shots" like you get for mumps or measles. Once our children have been exposed to some religion, we think they have all that they need, and we have done our jobs as parents.

Months ago the newspapers reported the story of a school bus driver who got lost taking home a group of students from a school for gifted children. In frustration the driver returned to the school and dropped them off on the front steps, telling them, "You're gifted -- you figure out how to get home!" The driver stranded them in the cold. Those children didn't want to ride the bus again.

The same thing happens when we don't recognize that we need Christ every day of our lives. Parents who give just a little dose of religion actually strand their children in the cold. Children don't see lasting value in religion when their parents don't see real value in it either. Once these children grow up, it's not surprising they don't want to ride the religious bus anymore.

What then is the greatest gift that we can give our children? It's not some brief exposure to religion, but real Christian education! Christian education repeats God's love throughout our lives. **"Christian Education is Our Greatest Gift."** 1) It shows us God's love and 2) It changes our lives forever.

I.

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell to God's Old Testament people. In a series of speeches Moses reviewed Israel's history and reminded Israel of God's commands and promises. This was the education God wanted his people to have. Notice to whom it was given, to **"you, your children and their children after them."** God's gift is for all people of all ages. You are never too young and you are never too old. Notice also the purpose for which God gave it. God gives this word so that you **"may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life."**

God shows us how far we have fallen short of his demands. Every sin demonstrates a lack of love for our God. It is only when we see our shortcomings that we see our need for a Savior and appreciate all God has done for us to forgive our sins.

And how is this knowledge about God's love for us to be shared? How do we educate? Through Moses, the Lord tells us, "**Impress them on your children. Talk to them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.**" Then the Lord adds two additional features, "**Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.**" Devout Jews still wear small leather packets with Scripture passages in them and they put small boxes with passages on their doorways so they can touch it when they come and go. In so doing they think that they are carrying out God's command, yet in fact they are missing his point. We are to use God's Word continually, not wear it occasionally. Teaching children to "**love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength**" is not a one-time shot but a lifelong process.

Parents and teachers tell "their" children about the Savior's love, a love without limits. God loves you and me so much that he sent his only-begotten Son to a cross, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. Our sins are wiped away. We have forgiveness. That is God's love for us. That is the joyful Good News he has given us to teach our children.

What is the greatest gift we can give? As Christian parents and members of a Christian congregation, our greatest gift is to help everyone see God's love in Jesus more clearly.

II.

Christian education is the greatest gift we can receive and it is the greatest gift we can share. Christian education centers our attention on God's love for the world. It is also the greatest gift because of what it does to us. Christian education changes our lives forever.

A well known Christian psychologist was once asked why we have our children learn Bible passages and parts of the catechism when the human mind within a few months forgets about 80% of what it has committed to memory. In response he listed four reasons. First of all, because it provides the basic self-discipline and self-control needed to function as an adult. Second, that even if a person can't recall the exact words at least he or she knows where to look for them. Third, we don't forget 100% of what we learn since the most important facts do find a place in our permanent memory. Then he concluded with perhaps the most important reason of all. Learning is important because we are changed by what we learn.

Christian education produces changes that will not fade with time. That's why our text says we are to impress the Lord's words on our children. We are to teach God's Word diligently. There is urgency to this teaching because it is so important. We impress the Lord's words on our children by repetition -- by telling of God's love in Christ Jesus again and again and again -- from baptism until the Lord calls us to stand before him for all eternity.

"Teaching diligently" or "impressing" these truths begins in the home as we teach our children how to pray at bedtime and before meals, as we read them Bible stories from a children's Bible or storybook again and again and as we conduct devotions. Then, we all as members of the church get involved through Sunday School, Confirmation Class and through Trinity Lutheran School. We don't replace Christian parents. We help parents teach their children about Jesus Christ and his love and forgiveness so these precious souls will remain firmly with Jesus for the rest of their lives.

What a glorious thing it is to witness the faith of a child. What a wonderful thing when parents model that Christian faith for their children. St. Paul reminded the young preacher Timothy of the example of Timothy's mother and grandmother. Paul urged him to stick with what he learned long ago as a little child. Paul wrote, "**continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures**" (2 Timothy 3:14-15).

Christian education, however, is not limited to the young. It is the gift that keeps on giving. The Word of God is the one thing in life that will truly last forever. That's why we are especially blessed to

continue to grow in that Word at Kettle Moraine Lutheran High School. Its motto of "**Educating for Life and for Eternity**" reminds us that our Christian education does not end with Sunday School or confirmation. We grow in our knowledge of God throughout the high school years and, yes, throughout our lives. Bible classes, regular attendance at worship, reading our bibles at home -- all contribute to continued growth.

No matter how many times we have heard the good news that our forgiveness has been won by Jesus and that we have eternal life, we benefit from considering it again. We repeat it so we don't lose it. And by repeating it we also encourage each other to share the news with those people close by and with those farther away.

Long after you and I are gone and our children have raised their children and have seen their children's children, nothing else will matter but that we taught our young ones and we ourselves continued to repeat the glorious truth that Jesus Christ is our Savior from sin. Nothing else will matter -- not the money we saved, the businesses we ran, the houses we lived in -- none of that will matter. The only thing that will matter will be the saving gospel of Jesus Christ who brings life to us and to our children. That message of God's love in Jesus has the power to change our lives. That is the greatest gift we can give -- the gift of life, real life, eternal life, in Jesus. Lord, help us see its importance and then provide it for ourselves and our children and their children after them. Amen.

Christian Education Sunday
8 February 2009

Pastor James F. Korthals

Trinity Lutheran Church
1268 Pleasant Valley Road
West Bend, Wisconsin