Invitation to the Table

One of the most articulate Christian voices I've encountered is Episcopal Priest, Joseph Yoo. Recently he said,

"I've always felt that Mary Magdalene's statement, 'I have seen the Lord,' is more meaningful than our traditional call and response, 'Christ is risen!' 'He is risen, indeed!'

"Easter and resurrection are not about a third-person confession but a first-person encounter.

"To say, 'I have seen the Lord' is to point out resurrection in the middle of ruins—to name life where others see only loss—to love in the world that rewards cruelty—to still be kind; still be good; still be decent even when the vile and vicious seem louder.

"'I have seen the Lord' is not naïve; it doesn't ignore pain; it doesn't ignore death or injustice; it just refuses to give them the last word. It insists there's another way to live—a way not driven by power or profit but shaped by grace, mercy, and sacrificial love.

"And right now we don't need just resurrection moments; we need people who can help the rest of us make sense of them; people who can name the heartbreak while also naming the hope breaking through it; people who can say, 'What you see is not all there is.'

"So, maybe the most powerful sermon you'll ever preach is "I Have Seen the Lord," and the most powerful witness is the life you live after seeing the Lord, because Easter isn't over, resurrection isn't past tense; God is still creating joy out of fear, still forgiving, still raising the dead, and maybe, just maybe, God is doing it through you."

In gratitude for these words from Rev. Yoo, we come to the table, where in loaf and cup we see the Lord.

Our Communion Hymn is #420, "I Come with Joy!"

Pastoral Prayer

God of boundless love and grace; the heavens declare your glory and the earth shows your handiwork.

Grant us the grace of words and actions that reflect your love and will make us examples of your love to those around use. Grant us courage to stand up for what is right and loving, and to speak out against injustice and hatred.

Use this church as a beacon of loving, inclusive welcome and compassionate caring, reaching out proactively through the gifts and resources of our people to administer wholeness in a fragmented world. May our love for others bring honor and glory to your name.

In a fragmented world dominated by resentment and retaliation, grant us grace to forgive those who hurt us and to release any grudge toward those who disagree.

Grant us patience, tolerance, kindness, caring, and love.

Watch, O Lord with those who wake or watch or weep tonight and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend your sick ones O Lord; Rest your weary ones; Bless your dying ones; Soothe your suffering ones; Pity your afflicted ones; Shield your joyous ones; and use us as your instruments of caring and healing, all for your love's sake. Amen."

Parents Graduate, Too!

DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9 (NRSVUE) *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7 Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

* * *

The Word of God for the people of God!

The Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran, wrote:

And a woman who held a babe against her bosom said, "Speak to us of children"
Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself
They come through you but not from you
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you
You may give them your love but not your thoughts
For they have their own thoughts
You may house their bodies but not their souls
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams
You may strive to be like them
But seek not to make them like you
For life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday
You are the bows from which your children
As living arrows are sent forth
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite
And he bends you with his might
That his arrows may go swift and far
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness
For even as he loves the arrow that flies
So he loves also the bow that is stable

Today at 2:00 o'clock, Bee Branch Southside High School Senior, Ben Hutto will graduate. This Friday, May 9, at 7:00 o'clock, Conway High School Seniors, Marley Crawford, Olivia Ferdowsian, and Max Polk will graduate. Two weeks from today, May 18, at 3:00 o'clock, Mayflower High School Senior, Abby Hargens will graduate, and in up in Grenell, Iowa, Grenell College senior, Anabelle Spayde will graduate.

So will their parents.

Student work is graded on the basis of an established standard; and they must achieve an established minimum grade point average before they can graduate.

Parents are graded, too; but there's no established standard. If kids turn out OK, they're praised and parents are basically ignored; but if a kid ends up not so good... "Parents are blamed but not trained." There's no parenting class in high school, no parenting degree in college. We're all ad-libbing the one vocation most humans will one day experience. But every parent is graded, and every parent graduates—ready or not.

Today's text from Deuteronomy offers a standard for parents; but it's not easy:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Sort of all-consuming.

The family unit bore key responsibility for passing faith and culture from one generation to the next. As a strategy it had only marginal success; still, it was never totally abandoned. Even in our lifetimes, as the responsibility shifted from family to Sunday school and public school, there were "take home" pamphlets with activities designed to encourage parents to be involved in the development of their children.

But in the years immediately following WWII, something began happening to the American family. The injunction attributed to Moses in Deuteronomy 6 addressed a tribal culture with large extended families, several generations: parents, grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings all living together, usually in the same tent complex. There were assigned roles, including the passing of religious teachings and cultural traditions from one generation to the next.

But in post WWII America, with the growing impact of corporate organizational structures and a swelling consumerism, the American family grew smaller and more isolated. By the time the Boomer generation was bearing children, the American "family" was nuclear, not tribal. It consisted of Mom and Dad, 2.3 kids, a dog and a canary.

And the American nuclear family was becoming busier and busier, filling every waking hour with obligations and activities, filling calendars and schedules to the point of insanity! In a typical home with two adult parent figures, both work forty hours a week or more. Then there's PTA, kids' sports, piano lessons, Girl Scouts, dance lessons, Karate, gymnastics, Rotary and Kiwanis projects, season tickets to Razorback games, ski trips; and we haven't even begun with the social life.

With hyperactive schedules sending the typical nuclear family in all directions at once, it's not unusual to find parents who rarely spend more than a minimum of quality time with their children—or with each other. Fewer and fewer families share a "sit-down" meal together on any regular basis.

Given the complications confronting the 21st century American family, maybe it's unrealistic and unfair to expect parents to be good providers, good parents, good spouses, good citizens, and to participate regularly and systematically in the spiritual and character formation of their children.

On the other hand, of the six graduating seniors related to our congregation; four have extended family within our community and two do not, and yet all six are high achievers in their own right, have valid visions for their future, and demonstrate good values and ethics. I wish I had time to brag about each one of them! Six families are doing something right in a culture that is increasingly sectarian and partisan in its definition of family responsibilities.

And so parents also should receive certificates of graduation when their children attain a successful transition into the next level of life.

But there's a major difference between 15th century BCE Israel and 21st century CE America. There are valid exceptions, but today, when children graduate, typically it's only a short time before most of them leave home to establish their own families and their own lives separate from their parents.

Parents graduate again, transitioning into what has been called the "empty nest syndrome," described as "the feelings of sadness, loneliness, and loss that some parents experience when their children leave home, often for college or to start independent lives." It's not a formal mental health condition, but it can be a difficult emotional transition for many; kind of bitter sweet.

There is a sense of loss, but hopefully a sense of fulfillment. Easy to say, huh? It's natural to miss our kids and be concerned about them—out on their own; that's a natural extension of the love and care we've poured into them all these years. Maybe you feel your daily purpose is shifting. With no more school runs, lunches to pack, or mountains of laundry to fold, you may experience a sense of irrelevance—a loss of purpose. The house may seem too quiet; you may actually miss the noise and chaos.

The "empty nest syndrome" actually is a form of grief, and we'll get into that element more deeply next week; but today I want to focus on the element of graduating—transitioning to the next phase of life. It can be experienced as emptiness, or as opportunity; and to some extent it's a matter of awareness and choice.

From my own experience both in leaving for college and then establishing my own family, and as the graduating parent whose children left the nest, I can lift up the hope that the relationship will only deepen—even at a distance. As my relationship with my parents shifted from dependence toward mutuality, I began to realize I didn't need them anymore, but I wanted them in my life as supporters and as best friends. As a parent, I experience that same transformation in my relationship with my adult kids.

That journey is not always easy; in fact, some of my most painful memories and disappointments come out of that time of transition, and I still hurt when they struggle. But there also is a sense of pride when they achieve; there's admiration over their ability to make their own way and make their own mark on the world. And there is true freedom as parental responsibility gives way to the mutuality of adult friendship. And, isn't that why we love and care and sacrifice for our kids? Isn't that the goal of it all?

I have loved watching our six graduates grow up. I know and love their families; therefore, I have every confidence that they have been well-prepared for the journey; and I pray for their parents as they set them free.

I think that's the implied outcome of the Deuteronomy passage we read; and it's the desired goal expressed in Kahlil Gibran's beautiful metaphor:

You are the bows from which your children
As living arrows are sent forth
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite
And he bends you with his might
That his arrows may go swift and far

Pray with me.