



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

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**A sermon by
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"Gifts for Our Children"

Matthew 7:7-11

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

A young boy was visiting his grandfather. Tim, the boy, lived in a large city, and attended the 3rd grade in a school that took great pride in its facilities, computer systems, faculty and programs. Tim always had a full week. There were scouts, soccer, T-ball, and other activities. When Tim went home he had a iPad and computer filled with games and other programs. He was quite adept at using the computer and was already lobbying his parents for a "smartphone." His room was filled with the most recent toys. His parents wanted the best for him, and worked hard to provide it. They were gone on a cruise and Tim was staying with his grandparents in a small town a few hundred miles away.

"I have something very special for you." His grandfather said. Tim's curiosity was piqued. He started guessing: "is it a remote control helicopter with a digital camera?" That would be special, Tim thought, especially here. The only games that his grandparents had were board games, and the only thing that was computerized was the thermostat.

"No," his grandfather replied. "It is very special, but things have to be just right before I can give it to you."

This was too much for Tim. He thought that he should make things "right" and so he cleaned his room and made his bed. He was very helpful to grandmother, and even weeded part of the garden.

"Are things right?"

His grandfather looked at the sky and saw the gray overcast day: "No, but maybe it will be later." That afternoon the sun broke through and the clouds lifted. The sky turned a rich blue and was spotted with puffy clouds. At the supper table, after Grandfather offered grace, Tim asked: "are things right?" He wanted his gift badly.

"I think so," his grandfather replied, "but we are going to have to wait. It is still too light out."

"I know, I know... You have fireworks!"

Grandfather only smiled and said, "Let's wait until it gets dark."

When evening enveloped the sky, Tim asked:

"Is it time?"

"Yes, come with me."

He led the boy into the large back yard. The grass was freshly mowed and filled the air with its scent. The crickets and the other insects were playing their music.

"Let's stop here."

Tim sat down on the ground, then his grandfather laid back and looked straight up. Tim did the same.

"Do you see that?" the elder asked Tim.

"What?"

"Just look. Do you see that?"

Tim kept looking...and looking. The sky was so vast and he did not know what he was looking for, but that made him look all the harder... For ten minutes they laid on their backs and looked at the sky in absolute silence.

"This is what I want to give you." The elder said to his grandson. "It isn't mine, but I am part of it...look at that sky, try and count the stars. Try and imagine the mind that created this."

They laid there longer, and Tim began to experience something he never felt before. All the things he had and did, all the experiences and excitement that was part of his life did not give him what he felt that night. He experienced a sense of wonder and awe. He had not heard the words of the Psalmist, but those words came alive that night. "When I look at the heavens and see the stars, I wonder, what are we human beings that you even think of us."

What do we want for our children? You might argue, "I don't have children, or they are grown up." But we all have children. Every time we baptize a child and we say that we will assist the parents, we acknowledge that we have children. What do we want for them?

I

We want the best for them. "I want to give my child what I didn't have." We hear that expression often, and we work hard to give them what we didn't have. But do we give them what we have? Like Tim's grandfather, do we give them what we have?

Jesus said to his disciples, "If your child asks for bread, do you give them a stone? And if they ask for fish, do you give them a snake?" I believe that our children are hungry. They are hungry for bread that will satisfy their souls. They are hungry for that sense that they are significant beings. They are hungry for a sense of reverence for the creation. What do we want to give our children? Are we giving them that which will nurture, or proverbial stones and snakes? We live in an age of opulence. Never have children had so much, yet if you listen to their voices, you hear they also hunger for something they do not have: a sense of awe and wonder.

The 21st century thrills, glitz, excitement and beat are consumed with a vengeance, believing these things will feed that hunger. We try and make things "exciting" and "interesting" for them, only to discover that they have developed a new threshold of tolerance. What do we want to give our

children? Bread or stones? Fish or snakes? I fear that we might be giving them the stones and snakes, believing that these things will nourish. We go to great lengths and sacrifice to give them these things... things that we did not have. Ironically, their hunger is for that which we have... we have just forgotten it.

II

We need to give our children these three things:

- a. A sense of transcendence; how to pray.
 - b. How to think and reflect on the human experience.
 - c. How to resist temptation.
- a. We need to give them a sense of transcendence. When you lay on your back and look at the stars, you begin to experience the vastness of creation. At once you feel small, miniscule, unimportant. But one also feels a part of something large and grand. One feels like she is participating in something greater than the "here and now". Laying on your back, staring at the stars, is almost like touching eternity.

Awe is not merely experienced when we are in the presence of the spectacular. The Pittsburgh author, Annie Dillard wrote:

"What does it feel like to be alive?

Living, you stand under a waterfall. You leave the sleeping shore deliberately; you shed your dusty clothes, pick your barefoot way over the high, slippery rocks, hold your breath, choose your footing, and step into the waterfall."

— Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood*

We learn to pray as we experience this sense of awe, wonder and mystery. It is then that we feel like we are creatures and that our lives are in the hands of God, and prayer becomes genuine intercession. We need to give our children the bread of transcendence, an experience of wonder and awe.

- b. We need to teach them how to think and reflect on the human experience. We teach all kinds of skills and all kinds of techniques. We teach them sports and we teach them recreation. We teach them digital programming. But teaching them to think and to touch their creative selves is often missing. In the third grade, my daughter came home and said that she had to bring a box to school, a cardboard box. We got one out, but curious, we asked why. She then explained that her teacher became a bit irate with the kids in her class. They were doing the usual routine: "this is boring." Her teacher told them to bring a box to school the next day. It could be any size. Some even brought refrigerator boxes. Then she told them, "For one week we are turning off the computers, the VCR's, and the electronic games. Most of the children of the world have only a cardboard box to play with." She then challenged them to learn to enjoy playing with just a box. They did.... But it required thinking and creativity. We need to give our children the bread that is thinking and creativity.
- c. We need to teach them how to resist temptation. We are very good at coming up with rules. The rules, we believe, will keep them from trouble and temptation. It works to a point. But when they grow up, they become adults who need rules. New situations and temptations are the cause for anxiety because there are not rules to respond to them. Rules are important and have their place,

but we do not give our children a rulebook for living. We need to give them the ability to understand the nature of good and bad, to understand evil and its insidious nature. We need to give them the gift of critical thinking and good judgment. They need to understand what oppression is, and how bigotry manifests itself. They need to know that hate is real, and that it needs to be challenged instead of met with silence. I believe that the Columbine tragedy, the rampant bullying that pervades our schools and the lack of civility on social media and in common discourse, are manifestations of a society that is ethically immature. Sadly, we seldom acknowledge the reality of evil in its banal forms, nor do we know how to resist it.

One of the realities of being a parent is that we aren't there all the time. We won't be there when they face peer pressure. We won't be there when they struggle with tempting choices that are new and novel. We need to give them the ability to understand the reality of evil in this world and to resist.

III

Tim and his grandfather lay on their backs; listening to the symphony of sounds that filled the night air, and beholding with wonder the creation of which they are a part. Grandfather took Tim's hand, gave it a squeeze and said: "Amen" Tim replied, "Amen."