

NEWS FROM LYNNE PABST

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Living as One in God's Image

Two weeks ago, I suggested that "We are all God's Children and One in God's Image". I then proposed that the way to teach our children this is to put into practice the understanding that "God created all in God's image". Everyday actions and everyday language are what our children see and hear. Therefore, we must make certain that the belief, "God created all in God's image", is embodied by everything we say and do.

Last week, I focused on language or what our children hear. This week I want to focus on what our children see. Most importantly what they see us do. Research shows that as early as infancy, children take cues from parents.

"By the end of the first year, infants are acutely sensitive to the emotional cues of other people, especially in uncertain or potentially threatening circumstances. In a process that researchers call social referencing, infants take their cues from the reassuring or anxious expression of a caregiver, which, in turn, can effect whether they continue to play comfortably or freeze in their tracks." (Shonkoff and Phillips, eds., 107)

I began to think about my childhood and my parents from the late 1950's to the early 1970's and what cues I received from them helping me come to see everyone as created by God and created in God's image. A few things come to mind.

First, my parents made certain that I experienced proximity to people and spent time with them. Anyone who studies Attachment Theory knows that attachment needs two things: proximity to an attachment figure and time with that attachment figure. I lived in a diverse community going to school with children of color and of many different religions. I spent time with people not just doing "God's Charitable work" but sharing life. I walked to school, played with, and lived with people. By the time I was 10 years of age I had participated in worship within Congregational, Universalist, Hungarian Reformed, Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Moravian, Lutheran, Black Gospel, Jewish, and Roman Catholic traditions and had experienced a Jewish wedding, Italian Catholic wedding, Chinese New Year's celebration and Feast of San Gennaro. I experienced these things not as an academic exercise nor as a missionary family but because we had friends and were part of one another's lives. Not only being exposed to the multiplicity of God's creation but being exposed to it at a young age is what helped me in life. I came to understand that it is not just "I am God's creation" and "They are God's creation" but that "*Together* we are God's creation and the image of God."

Whatever my parents needed to do, discuss, reflect upon and wherever they were invited, as children, we were brought into it in an appropriate way.

“Invite your children into your space, whether you’re meditating or praying, so they see your deliberate spiritual practice and purposeful creation of opportunity for spiritual insight, refocus, and growth.” (Miller, 340)

Because I was “brought in”, I became witness to my parent’s comfortability in being with all people and their understanding that the world as a whole is God’s great work.

Another formative experience which comes to mind is that while my parents helped me love all people, they also helped my love myself. The Great Commandment says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Matt 22:37-39, TEV). If one does not accept God’s love for self and recognize one’s own value before God how can one value neighbors?

“So if we put all our pieces together, it becomes clear, given what [Mr] Rogers understood by the love of God as revealed in Jesus, that we allow peace of God to emanate from our hearts by *advocating* for people—by affirming all others as good, valuable, and loveable; by accepting all others just as they are and offering forgiveness to anyone, whether or not he or she seeks it; by continuing to care for all others, even when they no longer serve our needs; and by seeing God in, between, and beside people. Most fundamentally, we allow the peace of God to emanate from us by advocating for ourselves in the exact same ways. By loving ourselves as God loves us, we become peace and being peace is the first step to creating peace. For Rogers, then, making peace is about reflecting the attitudes and actions of the advocate in our dealings with all others and ourselves.” (Long, 41-42)

Questions I am starting to ask are “Are people finding it hard to love neighbor because they do not love themselves, they are not comfortable with themselves and do not own relationship with God?” “Is peace between people difficult because people do not have peace within themselves?”

Guidelines for Helping Children Learn “Living As One in God’s Image”:

1. Give experiences early – talking about it in youth group or confirmation is too late – the infant, toddler, young child need to see, feel, and receive cues through what is modeled to them. It is at this early age that the foundation is laid.
2. Make it part of daily living – mission trips to another country once a year help but can be counterproductive because you return to your life – living with others must be part of the ordinary, the way of life.
3. Teach children to love themselves, to be comfortable with self, and to feel peace themselves secure in God’s love for them.

I know now you are asking, how do we do this when the nearest synagogue is 100 miles away and there are no churches based on black gospel traditions in our area:

My first response is there is diversity everywhere even in the most homogeneous of communities because of God's creativity. So, cross the railroad tracks (to use an old term) in your own community first:

- Worship with another church
- Have dinner in your home with someone claiming a different heritage than yours
- Build a friendship with someone in a homeless shelter
- Pay attention to youth mental health and spiritual health
- Accept all children who enter your doors

Second, make use of what COVID 19 has given us – Virtual everything:

- Tune into a worship service of another faith tradition
- Watch documentaries (Some people say watch movies. I am cautious here as many of them produce stereotypes and are developed as entertainment making us laugh at one another rather than with one another. So movies need to be carefully chosen and viewers carefully debriefed.)

Third, take a step farther:

- Invite missionaries to speak at your church
- Host an international student
- Listen to your children and pray with them
- Talk with your children (the children's book list shared a few weeks ago and reprinted below is a starting point)
- Do not just give to the food bank – adopt a family and cook together once a week

Blessings!!!

Living as one in God's Image starts in our own neighborhood and with our own children.

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