

Teach your children well

by *Mary Nitzsche*

Jesus invited his disciples to “come and see” as he lived the good news he taught. He used ordinary people going about their daily lives—a woman drawing water at the well, day laborers seeking work, farmers gathering their crops, and people struggling with health challenges. He used ordinary experiences of life—walking along the road, riding in the boat, sitting on the hillside, strolling through the marketplace, and praying in the garden. He used the ordinary stuff of life—bread, water, grain, weeds, trees, coins, lamps, and sheep. Jesus used every opportunity arising out of ordinary life to embody and teach theology.

Our faith is shaped in a variety of ways through the people with whom we interact, the life experiences we have, the places we worship, and the schools we attend. While it is important to have structured times of instruction at home, school, and church, faith is often taught through the ordinary experiences of life over a lifetime. Using teachable moments to discuss beliefs and values connects faith to life’s experiences. Living what we believe and value gives authenticity to faith.

While I was not always consistent as a parent of two daughters, I share ways in which I tried to teach and live my theology in the ordinary of life—eating meals, riding in the car, attending concerts, watching TV, or walking along the beach. As I offered prayers at mealtime or bedtime, I was teaching my children about God and what is important to God. I was helping them understand God wants us to regularly communicate our needs, concerns, thanksgiving, and love. I was com-



Offering hospitality and friendship to foreign students around the kitchen table, Mary and her husband teach their daughters what they believe.

Photo by Mary Nitzsche

municating God loves the entire world, and not just our nation.

As we took family vacations, our daughters learned the importance of rest and play, the beauty and diversity of God's creation, and the value of extended family.

As I placed my offering in the basket each Sunday and invited my daughters to contribute a portion of their monthly allowance,

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I was teaching them the importance of giving to God and to the church. As we purchased Christmas gifts to donate to a local ministry or school supplies for Mennonite Central Committee school kits, I was teaching them the importance of sharing with those in our community and around the world.

As my husband and I took part in a local ministry to assist children and parents to “shop” for school supplies or Christmas gifts, we were teaching the importance of donating our time to serve. When our daughters were old enough to be mentors to young girls in the community, they gave of their time to serve our local community children.

As I admitted my mistakes to my daughters, and asked them to forgive me, I was teaching them about humility, the importance of taking responsibility for our words and actions, and the power of forgiveness when we have hurt another person.

I taught them to be truthful when we discussed why I refused to call the school and report they were sick when they needed a “mental health” day, or when I invited them to reflect on how lying or stretching the truth contributes to distrust in relationships.

I taught my daughters to take responsibility for their actions as I refused to bail them out when they lacked assertiveness, got in trouble at school, or procrastinated. To encourage them to respond with courage and hope in these situations, I helped them rehearse a phone conversation before making the call, think through how to respond to a teacher who treated them unfairly, or generate ideas of what they could do differently the next time the situation arose.

I taught my daughters the gift of hospitality and diversity as we entertained a variety of people in our home including international students from the local college. Each month for seven years, we prepared a meal from another culture, read a book, and colored the flag of that country. Both daughters chose to study abroad for

one semester while in college, and their appreciation for persons of other cultures, ethnic groups, and religions deepened.

Even as we use ordinary life situations to teach and live our theology, there is no guarantee our children will choose the values and beliefs we taught. They may put their theology together differently or make choices we cannot support. Our responsibility as parents is to love our children and faithfully provide opportunities for them to learn to know how to follow Jesus in the ordinary of life. ☐

Resources

Books

Blackaby, Marilyn. *Experiencing God Around the Kitchen Table*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2008.

Shenk, Sara Wenger. *Coming Home*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1992.

Stokman, Peg. *Kitchen Table Theology: Wisdom from the Heart and Hearth*. Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1996.

Thompson, Marjorie J. *Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1989.

Websites

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=850>

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