

Suttons Bay Congregational Church

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Matthew 12:33-37

The Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

33"Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. 34You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. 35The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. 36But I tell you that men will have to give account on the Day of Judgment for every careless word they have spoken. 37For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned."

In his best-selling book *Freakonomics*, economist Steven Levitt devotes an entire chapter to parenting. It may sound strange to have an economist writing about parenting, and yet Leavitt uses statistics and research to draw very helpful conclusions on the topic. Perhaps I appreciate his writing because I couldn't agree with him more, his words echo my own sentiments about child-rearing—that opinions on parenting are a dime a dozen. For instance, my mother wouldn't have dreamed of putting me to sleep on my back. In 1974, parenting experts recommended putting babies to sleep on their stomachs and they had lots of data to back up their claims. However, in 2005, I wouldn't dream of putting Nathan to sleep on his stomach. He's always laid down to sleep on his back because that's what all of the experts recommend and they have statistics to back them up. Nathan even has pajamas that have the words, "Back to Sleep" stitched by the manufacturer right on the front panel. He wears them when he is around his grandparents and others for whom it is a struggle to remember the new rules of sleep positioning. And sleep positioning is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to parenting trends—bottle or breast, disposable or cloth, Advil or Tylenol, cry-it-out or co-sleeping, the list goes on and on. And yet there are a few generally agreed upon principles of parenting—one of them being that reading to your kids is good for them and even makes them smarter. But Mr. Leavitt's research balks in the face of common knowledge and his analysis of the statistics prove his point. His findings, that you don't have to read children's books to your child for hours on end or else risk them becoming a drain to society, are good news to the working parent who has precious little bonding time with baby and, knowing that this reading thing is important, finds him or herself multi-tasking and instead of reading *Good Night Moon* or *Pat the Bunny*, lulls the baby to sleep with purchase reports, newspaper articles, or in our case, Biblical commentaries on the upcoming Sunday's Scripture passages.

Mr. Leavitt writes . . .

As noted earlier, a child with many books in his home has indeed been found to do well on school tests. But regularly reading to a child doesn't affect test scores . . . So what does all this have to say about the importance of parents in general? Consider the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study factors that are [positively] correlated with [above average] school test scores:

The child has highly educated parents.

The child's parents have high socioeconomic status.

The child's mother was thirty or older at the time of her first child's birth.

The child's parents speak English in the home.

The child's parents are involved in the PTA.

The child has many books in the home.

To over-generalize a bit, the list includes things that parents *are*; [while another list of factors that have no affect on test scores describes things] that parents *do*. Parents who are well educated, successful, and healthy tend to have children who test well in school; but it doesn't seem to much matter whether a child is trotted off to museums or spanked or sent to Head Start or frequently read to or plopped in front of the television.

Mr. Leavitt claims that it's not the reading to the child that matters in terms of future test scores, but rather it's the existence of books in the house that prompts higher intellect in a child. In other words, it's not what the parent does to or with the child—namely reading to them in this case—that makes the difference. Rather, it's what the parent does himself or herself that makes the difference. If the only time a child sees a parent reading is when a father or mother is perched on a bedside with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, then that a fine reader does not make. However, if a child sees a parent choosing to read on his or her own time, if a reader is something that the parent IS instead of reading is just something the parent DOES—well then that's the recipe for raising a child who has an increased chance of doing well on tests.

And it's a helpful finding—this importance of being instead of just doing—for all of us as we contemplate our own Christian discipleship. Is Christian discipleship something that we do, or is a disciple someone who we are? And this morning's parable from the gospel about a good tree bearing good fruit helps us answer that question.

How does a good tree become good? A good tree becomes good by spending time in a forest of good trees. And, before long, it becomes good, too. Just as one piece of bad fruit can cause a whole bowl to go bad, so too can just being around one good tree help all of the trees be a little bit better. It's true what Mr. Leavitt says, that we become a reflection of our surroundings. Just remember Ferdinand. Ferdinand does not live in the marshes alongside a pond or river. Ferdinand's friends and playmates are not other ducks. Rather, Ferdinand's surroundings are that of a dog—he lives in a dog crate, he eats out of a dog dish, and the other creatures with whom he has lived throughout his life have been dogs. Therefore, when he judges himself by his surroundings, he thinks he's a dog and so he acts like a dog. If Ferdinand could talk with us, I think he would tell us that, except for a few variables that are out of his control such as webbed feet and a beak, he has become a dog.

And that's the power that environment has over us. It can make a duck think, act, and live like a dog. And Jesus says the same about people, that a good environment, a good tree, produces good fruit. A good environment gives birth to a good person who gives birth to good words and deeds, just as parents who are readers tend to have children who are readers who do better on school tests than do non-readers.

And these findings offer us yet another answer to the question that has been nagging us for weeks—why do good? Today's scriptures, Mr. Leavitt's book, and even Ferdinand the Barking Duck support the answer that by doing good we help create a world of good and the good begets good and on and on it goes. And Lord knows that the world can really use a little more goodness right now. And though it may seem that we can't really make a difference, that what ever we have to offer wouldn't ever be enough, that's simply not true. Because, you never know how your goodness is going to effect change for the better.

I think again of our friend Ferdinand the Duck. From what I understand from listening to Margaret's story about how Ferdinand came into their lives, the Bells didn't set out to have ducks. Rather, a local photographer was using some baby ducklings to spruce up some springtime photos. After all, is there anything in the world cuter than a baby animal? It was a good marketing scheme. But as happens with these things, the ducklings began to grow and the photographer was done with them—no one wants a picture of junior taken with a molting duckling going through that ever so awkward, and really kind of ugly, phase of loosing duckling fuzz as it is replaced by duck feathers. And so the photographer was looking for a home for the ducks and Margaret, in an act of goodness, took them in. Sadly, they had not received proper nutrition and the other ducklings—Ferdinand's siblings—all died. But good ol' Ferdy persevered. And, so that he wouldn't be lonely, he was housed with the Bell's dogs, Stout and Bacchus. And seven years later I met Ferdinand, who thinks he is a

dog, and found him to be an exemplary illustration of Jesus' parable about the Good Tree bearing Good Fruit. And my hope is that now, every time you see a duck, you'll think of Ferdinand and you'll remember that he thinks he is a dog and you'll remember that we become like our environment and you'll remember Jesus' lesson that a good tree produces good fruit and that, being good, you'll go forth and do good for another. And all this goodness will be inspired by Margaret's act of goodness of bringing Ferdinand home in the first place. Indeed, good begets good.

And perhaps that's one of the reasons we come to this table. Not because we've been good, but because we want to do good, we want to be good, we want there to be more goodness in this world. And by participating in this Holy Meal we are entering into the realm of the greatest do-gooder there ever was—Jesus our Christ. Somehow, participating in this meal helps us be a little bit better, it heals us and it motivates us. And when we're feeling just a little bit better, we make our little corner of the world just a bit better. And so it goes, little by little on this World Wide Communion Sunday—millions of Christians around the world eating at this table and by doing so, making the world just a little bit better, one believer, one congregation, one community at a time. So, when the time comes, I invite you all to come—partake of the goodness so that you might be filled with goodness and go forth into the world to do good.

Let us pray . . .

God is so good. God is so good. God is so good, God is good to me.

Surely God you have shown us goodness beyond measure. You have blessed us with families who love us, friends who support us, a community that cares for us, and a church that embraces us. You have revealed yourself to us in the goodness of others and you have given us the opportunity to do good for others. We pray that you might give us the courage, strength, and perseverance to continue to do good to all of your creation—even when doing good is not the popular or easy thing. We are grateful that you forgive us when we fail to do good and that you continue to call us to be agents of your goodness and love in this world.

On this World Wide Communion Sunday we pray that you would open our minds and hearts to our brothers and sisters around the globe. We pray for those who are now sleeping in Japan, for those having dinner somewhere in Asia, for those enjoying the view of the setting sun in Africa, for families sitting down to dinner in Europe, and for our brothers and sisters who have not yet awoken to greet

your creation on this new day. Make us one with them in Spirit so that we might all be inspired to see you in each other, and do good unto one another.

And just as our thoughts turn to your people spanned across the world, they also turn to your beloved children who live in our little corner of creation. Today we pray for Maggie Manning who is in surgery after breaking her femur. May the tumor they found in her bone be clear of cancer.

And now in the silence, O God, we lift to you those people and situations we know to be in special need of your care.

All of these prayers we offer in the name of Jesus, your precious child, our beautiful savior, who taught us to pray together saying, Our Father, . . .