



Marilyn Sharpe
Ministries, LLC

GOD'S GIFT OF TIME: STEWARDSHIP IN FAMILIES

The Clergy Journal September 2004

WHAT IS STEWARDSHIP IN FAMILIES?

It's about money, isn't it, about how we use the treasure entrusted to us by God, with which we are to serve others in God's world? Money, and what it can buy. Isn't that parents teaching their children to put aside a tithe of their allowance to give as an offering? Or, are we to dig a little deeper to help support a mission in a third world country? Or perhaps it is an opportunity to talk about children in our midst who are less fortunate and purchase a toy for Santa Anonymous or Toys for Tots. Or is it the conversation about caring for the hungry in our community by bringing food for the food drive? Yes, it's about all of those. Treasure. And more....

It's about the talents, the natural gifts and skills we have that can be used to build up the body of Christ. It's a child's choice to sing in the choir, to help lead worship by making a joyful noise and praising God. It's another child using the gift of hospitality to welcome the new child in Sunday School to "Come sit by me. I'm glad you came." It's the youth who has a gift with children who offers to counsel younger children in day camp or help in the church nursery. It's the middle school, technology savvy youth who offers to teach seniors in the congregation to use the library computer to stay connected with their grandchildren across town or across the world by email. Yes, it's about all of those. Talents. And more...

Ultimately, though, it's all about time. Time, God's gift of life, measured not in units of minutes, hours, days and years; but rather to be measured as opportunities to be present with one another, to love one another as God has first loved us, and to serve one another with time, talent and treasure, as the way God most wants to be loved back.

WHAT'S GONE WRONG?

Families live in a culture with values the opposite of those Jesus held. Culture says, "value things." Christ says, "value people." Culture says, "put yourself first." Christ says, "serve others." Culture says, "never be satisfied with what you have; yearn for newer, bigger, brighter." Christ says, "the abundant life I bring is

peace, joy and contentment.” Culture says, “hurry up, be busy, do, do, do.” Christ says, “slow down, remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Culture says, “money and power and status are our gods; worship them.” Christ says, “God is God; worship God only.” Culture says, “now!” Christ says, “focus on the things that are eternal and I am with you always.” Culture is toxic for children and other living things with its emphasis on acquisition and materialism and self-centered living. Christ calls us into community, to love one another as we have been loved.

Embedded in this culture, what has happened to families? They have sped up to warp speed. They are busy about work and school and sports and enrichment activities and being spectators of virtual lives. Even when they are all at home, they go to their own room with their own phone, own television, own electronic gadgetry. The primary presence in the family room is not the family; it is the t.v. They don't eat together or talk together or play together or worship together. They have become islands with the same mailing address.

Even congregations inadvertently contribute to this fragmentation and speed. In the name of Jesus, people are pulled out of the family and into activities, programs, education, service and worship, often divided into age-segregated groups. The activities are important... but they are pulling families apart.

SO, WHAT CAN CONGREGATIONS DO?

Keep families together, at least some of the time, in worship, in learning and in service.

Help families learn the Four Keys for nurturing faith:

Caring conversations – Help families learn how to talk to and especially how to listen to one another. Value time spent getting to know one another. What happened today that you enjoyed? What made you proud? What in the world concerns you? What do you dream about? What makes you afraid? What disappoints you?

Family devotions – Teach families to say grace, to pray before bedtime, to pray for one another, to pray for others. Help families find resources for their devotional life together. Teach families to talk about finding God in their everyday life. Who was the light of Christ for you today? For whom

were you the light of Christ? What do you see in the news that would concern God? What can we as a family do about it? Help families read scripture together and find themselves in God's story. Only 10% of churching families ever talk about faith outside of their congregation, yet the four most powerful factors that predict whether our children will have faith are what mom and dad say and do!

Rituals and traditions – Offer examples of family rituals that include God. Instead of yelling, “Get up now, the bus is coming!” invite families to greet the day as God's creation and gift to them. “This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.” “God go with you today.” “I'll be praying for you. What would you like me to pray about?” Let us send one another off with a blessing and an affirmation of our love and God's love for them. Before school, bless the backpacks. Write a note with a short grace or prayer in a lunch bag. Close the day with prayers and blessings and reminding our children of their baptism and God's loving claim on them with the sign of the cross on each forehead, whether it is a 2 month old or a 22 year old.

Infuse traditions with faith talk. At Thanksgiving, instead of just asking, “white meat or dark?” ask, “What is one thing for which you thank God this year?” At Christmas, serve a birthday cake and sing Happy Birthday to baby Jesus.

At a family reunion, tell stories about who in the family has helped you see Jesus. Little things, braided into the dailyness of our lives, helps us to see God in all of life, helps us to be faithful to God's call in Deuteronomy 6:6-7

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.

Family service – Create opportunities in your congregation for entire families to serve together: greeting before the service, reading lessons together, serving dinner at a soup kitchen, cleaning up the church grounds in the spring, visiting a nursing home resident, making cards for shut ins, hosting a party for adults with develop-

mental disabilities, doing a family mission trip. The possibilities are endless. Just don't separate the ages or let the parents just write a check. Help all of the ages to learn to follow Jesus' example at the Last Supper with his disciples.

(Jesus) said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord – and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

Let us give families opportunities to wash one another's feet and to wash the feet of others.

And send families home and provide resources to families to be able to do the Four Keys! Let us make sure that we do not keep family members so busy at church that they do not have time together. One congregation decided to have no meetings or classes or activities during Lent one year. Instead, they supplied households with family devotional materials and sent them home to be the church at home. What a concept!

We can make a difference in helping families become stewards of God' precious gift of time together.

STEWARDSHIP OF FAMILY TIME: THINGS A FAMILY CAN DO

- MAKE FAMILY TIME A PRIORITY
- PUT IT ON THE CALENDAR
- LIMIT OTHER ACTIVITIES
- KEEP WORK UNDER CONTROL
- PLAN A WEEKLY FAMILY SABBATH
- EAT TOGETHER
- TURN OFF THE TV
- TALK TOGETHER
- PLAY TOGETHER
- PRAY TOGETHER
- HAVE FAMILY FUN NIGHTS
- MAKE HOME A SAFE HARBOR
- CELEBRATE DIFFERENCES
- SPEAK WITH LOVE