

Reminiscence of a Christian Father

Proverbs 17:6 “*Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children.*”

It’s really wonderful when the relationship between parents and children is so good that the children are proud of their parents. What a blessing from God!—a blessing that usually comes by hard work. This morning I want you to hear something which I hope will encourage you to work hard at or thank God for your good relationship with your parents or with your children.

Many of you know that St. John belongs to a group of churches called ‘the WELS.’ Our history as a denomination stretches back 173 years. In the early decades worship was conducted in German. (German services continued here at St. John until about 50 years ago.) In the early days when our churches needed someone to teach theology to our seminary students, we called upon Pastor Hoenecke. He turned out to be the most important theologian in the first 60 years of our denomination. Most of those who knew him, knew him only from his preaching and teaching and writing, all of which he was highly regarded for.

When the Reverend Professor Pastor Hoenecke had already gone to heaven and his children were getting old, one of his sons wrote a reminiscence about his Father. I decided to share some of this

reminiscence with you today, on Father’s Day. Keep in mind that Professor Hoenecke died over 110 years ago and had been born in Germany. So you will notice some cultural differences. Yet what a godly example he set for us by following God’s Word wholeheartedly.

Hobbies and Favored Things

Father was a great friend of music. He played guitar and had a good tenor voice. He took an uncommon pleasure in hearing all the great [classical] works when they were played. On Sunday afternoons when I was a student at our seminary, I often played [the piano] for Father for hours, and he would never get tired of it. If he sat upstairs in his study and heard the striking of the piano keys below, he was soon downstairs right next to the player, and conducting.

It is known that Father also had a great love for flowers. He was a fan of new varieties. He was the first in Milwaukee to grow date palms from seeds. An old gardener told him, “You should have been a botanist.”

Celebrating the 4th of July was always beautiful at our house. Father made his own fireworks: jumping jacks, Catherine wheels, flyers, and Bengal fire fountains. He had obtained a book for himself on pyrotechnics. He prepared his own paper tubes and gunpowder. We often had to help with it.

Our Father's Relationship with Mother

The relationship between Father and Mother was an uncommonly happy one. Of course there were small differences once in a while. You only rarely see a completely cloudless sky.

Father and Mother were happy with each other because they both were governed by what God's Word commands to all married people. That is the foundation for happiness in married life. Our Mother felt a heartfelt devotion to Father. She esteemed him highly, let him be the head of the wife, constantly paid attention to that authority of his, submitted, and acted as his representative toward us children. Father thought the world of Mother, paid attention to her rights, and did for her whatever he could. As a result they both had a happy married life with each other, until death separated them. They took their stand on their heartfelt trust in God through Christ. Faith is and remains the source of all good behavior, also in married life. What made things even easier for them was that they both had a heartfelt trust in each other too.

Father's Relationship with His Children

From theology Father learned that in our relationship to the heavenly Father, everything depends on faith. When we trust God, we willingly behave according to God's commands, we are

content with his leading, and so we bear without complaining whatever crosses [God] lays upon us. From this Father knew that trust has to be the foundation underlying every human relationship. No father can raise his children, no matter how fervently he seeks their inner piety, unless his children put a proper trust in him.

Father carefully gained our trust and kept it as long as he lived. He didn't hear evil words from us, never anything contrary. As a result of this trust and confidence we placed in Father, it was possible for him to achieve with his children a true Christian upbringing, planting them in Christ through faith. He understood that Christianity, faith, and a pious life have to come to children through their parents. When parents nourish their children's trust, the children are willing to receive direction, admonition, and warnings from them. But when parents, through mistakes in upbringing, or through carelessness in their relations with their children, lose their children's trust, then mistrust steps in where trust was, and that mistrust grows into despising and hatred. These parents end up with awfully hard soil to work and plant Christ into. They don't get all the way through to the children's hearts, and so the children comply only unwillingly, and only as long as they are dependent on the parents' wallets. They often go the way of the flesh as soon as they do not need the parents anymore. So, parents, you can't raise

Christian children without having their trust.

Because Father had our trust, it was not difficult for him to get us to obey his commands and do our chores willingly. With that it should not be said that we children were always paragons of virtue. We were plenty naughty, broke plenty of windows, and trampled many flowers, whose blossoms Father had been doting on for so long. That then lead to some painful scenes.

As a result of this trust, it did no harm when Father sometimes had to punish us severely. At St. Matthew's in those days, there were a number of solid Christians among the [church] council members. One of them, Friedrich Zell, was a wagon maker and a horse shoer. He had a good heart, though he was outwardly rough and tough. Once he said to my father, "The young'uns give you trouble, Herr Pastor: I'll bring something that will get respect." And one day he brought Father an implement, a long piece of wagon-wheel spoke, on which was nailed the leather rein of a horse, cut to just the right length. How this implement was applied, needs no further explanation. From then on, it hung on a cupboard in the kitchen in plain sight. In honor of its inventor, we children named the implement "Uncle Zell." Father did not use this instrument often, though when he did, he was thorough with it,

not gentle. But in no way did that embitter us toward Father. Our trust in him prevented that. But in every house where mistrust toward the father rules, every chastisement from his hand will only embitter the children and harden their hearts against him more. All the other parts of good upbringing depend on children trusting their parents.

How did Father awaken in his children this trust? It took earnest studying and much thought. He couldn't just shake it out of his sleeve. The wisdom of how to bring up children is not at all something that, as many think, a father gets as soon as his baby comes. Above all, a father needs to be conscious of his children's precious value—they are treasures dearly bought with the blood of Christ. Christ has entrusted them to him by so that they might be saved. Wherever this consciousness lives, a father will be earnest about bringing up his children. He will ask God to enlighten him properly so that he can do it right and not ruin everything by taking foolish measures, however well intended. He will study and get advice with which he might begin, continue, and finish the job right. That is also the way Father began. Only fatherly love will awaken a child's trust, the same way God's love leads us to trust in Him. But whenever a father, who indeed has been appointed to be lord over his

children, instead of being loving, won't let them forget what a severe lord he is, or whenever a father is a weak lord like Eli, then there will not be any trust. Great severity kills all trust and stirs up fear and hatred. Weakness gets a child to despise his father and be his father's lord.

Father did not fall into either mistake in the love he felt for his children. He behaved neither like a tyrant nor like a weakling. He was never rough, nor did he let his children despise him. He always stood before us as one who commanded respect. His manner left the impression of someone who had himself under control. He was cheerful and loved a good joke, but he hated impropriety. He was upright in his Christian living, allowing no contradiction between his words and deeds. He was faithful in his calling, always worthy of his fatherhood. He let it be known that he was the lord of the house. But this did not at all dim his love for his children.

His love showed itself in many ways. Certainly he gave all his children a good education. He was constantly thinking of his children's well-being. If he had to punish us sometimes, he was conciliatory right after, especially conciliatory, especially friendly and would give us some present. As Luther says, the apple must always live next to the rod. His children will never forget how Father always took

part so sincerely in their playing. I still often think of how many kites Father built us. When kite-flying time came and the sky was swarming with kites, Father was very busy. He built one kite after another. He put the pen down and made kites. He had one goal in mind for them: the kites should not teeter back and forth in the air, but stand there still against any blast of wind. When we had one of his kites flying well in the air and called to him, he came right out of his study and checked with his expert eye how the kite was handling itself in the air. And when all too often the tissue paper, with which the kite frame was covered, ripped, Father bought book-binder's linen and covered the kites with that. He built us a water fountain and a lot of other things. Without doubt, he must have spent a lot of time thinking through all of that. His love was sincere, and it made us children very attached to our Father.

Proverbs 17:6 *“Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children.”* May all of us be as proud of our parents, whether they are living or dead. May all parents be enabled by God to love and guide their children into the paths of the Lord so that the next generation may also be proud of their parents. This too is a way to glorify our Savior Jesus Christ.

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