

But God also invited David to rely on the people around him; in this case, it was his future son, Solomon. But for us, God says to let our community help us; and sometimes to be that help for others. There are ways we can help each other release the pressure, push back on the expectations, carry the load. Two weeks ago, our church hosted a Parents Night Out for church families. Parents could drop off their kids at the church on a Friday night with plenty of caregivers here with them. The kids ate pizza, watched a movie and played games, while the parents had a few hours to themselves. Most enjoyed time with a spouse—dinner together, time to talk without interruption, some space and quiet. My family took advantage; and it was a gift. The church family tried to *be* community for parents, to lift the burden, for a minute, that our culture places on them. There was a lot of gratitude. Many of you do that kind of thing all the time, not just for parents, but supporting those who are struggling in all different ways. Doing that is ministry. Telling someone else that you will take care of their work for a time, you will hold the hard things for them, that is discipleship. You are blessing to those you help. And when we get to receive that care, we are accepting God’s invitation to humbly rely on others; to not do everything ourselves.

God is our parent: constant in faith and love; sure in the grace God gives; never growing weary of nurturing us. And so, in whatever vocation and calling we find ourselves in, especially when it feels like too much to bear, that means we are invited to stop and rest. We can rely on the faithfulness of God to carry us through. We can ask for and trust in the support of others, so that we can let go of our grip on the reins, at least a little bit.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God.



October 20, 2024

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost

“God Our Parent”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-7; 1 Kings 5:1-5; 8:27-30

On August 28, the U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy issued a health advisory. But it wasn’t about cancer or air pollution. It was about parenting. He warned that parental stress in this country is so high, it is an urgent public health crisis.¹ We are living in an era of what is called *intensive parenting*. As sociologist Sharon Hays has written, intensive parenting is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.”² Parents feel the pressure to constantly educate, enrich, and engage kids. This style of parenting stems from economic conditions that shifted in the early 1980s. Whereas in the past, parents could assume that their children’s economic outcomes would always exceed their own, it then became just as likely that the children would do worse than their parents. To try to ensure kids’ success, the culture, across all racial and economic groups, began to focus on giving them lots of enrichment, extracurriculars, and preparation to get into a good college, leaving little time for anything else. Even when parents try to resist these pressures, it’s almost impossible. As a parent myself, I can affirm all this. The pressure on parents is almost like the air we breathe or the ocean we swim in; we can’t just exit even if we want to. Which leaves a lot of us struggling, wearing ourselves out, even when we would like to stop and rest and pull back a little. We’re no longer sure what our children really need, what’s too much or not enough involvement, and who we are in the midst of it. These are big questions of vocation—who God is calling us to be and what we are called to be about.

I suspect the parents with kids still at home among us are nodding, thinking “yeah, no surprises here. This is all obvious.” Some in older generations might be shaking your heads wondering why parents are doing this to themselves? It didn’t use to be this way, right?! Back in the day kids just came home when the street lights came on and everything was fine. But a *public health* crisis is just that: it’s bigger than any individual decision and it impacts all of us in the wider community, whether we are parents

1 “U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory on the Health and Well-Being of Parents,” August 28, 2024, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2024/08/28/us-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-mental-health-well-being-parents.html>

2 Qtd in “The Parents Aren’t All Right,” The Daily NYT podcast, hosted by Micahel Barbaro with guest Calire Cain Miller, October 9, 2024.

or not. We all need tools to navigate our way through it together, so that everyone can be healthy, well, and the people God has made them to be.

Parent is a common image for God, of course. Some of us like to think of God as a Father, as we say in the Lord's Prayer. Others take comfort in God's mothering, which is lifted up across the Old and New Testaments, as well. There are some traits of God we can emulate, and others that we know belong to God alone. And we can never put God into any one parenting box, anyway. Like King Solomon said to God, "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you!" But when we see and hear God interacting with David in the scripture, raising him up as the chosen leader for the people, how did God do it? Was God constantly nurturing David to try to ensure his success? Or was God more of a 'free-range parent,' giving freedom and the chance to take risks? Noticing what God did and does as our parent can encourage us in all our various vocations, and might also provide some clues for those who are parenting today.

The first passage we read describes the time when David was beginning his reign and becoming established as the king over the people of Israel. God loved David and wanted him to flourish. The purpose of the monarchy was to bless God's people with good and faithful leadership, so that they could thrive. But, as in all parenting, we can never ensure the exact outcome for our children that we want. People are individuals; they make free choices; parents can only control so much. The same was true for God's nurturing of David. God tried to provide and raise him up to faithfulness. David did a lot of good. And later on, he also made some awful mistakes.

What we see emerge between David and God was a rich relationship, narrated through the prophet Nathan. There was give and take. We see the expectations of each expressed. At the start, David noted what a beautiful place he was living in. And he felt that he should provide a house for God, as well. It was a noble thought; it showed care and respect for the God who had lifted David from his meager beginning tending flocks to become the leader of a nation. But God wanted to be clear about *who* was taking care of *whom*. God reminded David that God had never needed a house before. God had traveled right along with the people, moving in a tent and a tabernacle. A house was not something God wanted, not right then at least. So God told David to stop. Someone else would be in charge of building God's house. That someone would be David's own son, Solomon. When the time came, Solomon would build God a glorious house. But that work was not David's to do.

This is something we say in our family quite often when our kids are trying to do more than they need to, when they are trying to be in charge.

We say, "just be a kid. No need for you to be the parent." I'm not sure it has the intended effect, but we try. That sentiment is one of God's teachings in this text for our modern ears. What work is ours to do? When an expectation or opportunity comes before us, we are constantly called to ask ourselves, "is that *mine* to do? Just because there's pressure to do this, is *God* calling me to this particular thing?" It's a question of discernment, as so much of our faith is. When we're faced with those situations, we're invited to consider our gifts, our callings, and what God needs, or doesn't need, from us right then. Some things are absolutely ours to do. Even things that we would rather set aside or hope someone else will do. The problems in our community from food insecurity and costly housing, to the ongoing impacts of racism and prejudice - those are ours to solve together, at least in some measure. No one else is going to do it for us.

But sometimes, the answer is, "that is *not* mine to do." Surprising as it was for the King, building a temple for God was not David's task to do. As a loving parent, God urged David to wait, to stop. In fact, God turned the tables on David completely, using a bit of wordplay on the word "house." God promised to be the one to build David a different kind of house; which meant a succession of children and leaders who would continue the covenant relationship with God. It turned out this was God's work to do. God promised love and care for David's family for all time. As a parent, it doesn't get much more intensive than that.

In time, Solomon came along and became King. Things had changed, and the time arrived for him to build a house for God, a temple. The temple became a place of prayer and gathering for the people. But even Solomon knew that God could not be limited to that place, made with human hands. God was free to be God, no matter what. The human role, the child role, perhaps, was to pray to God and praise God on earth and in highest heaven.

No matter what our vocation is, whether we are sinking under the weight of pressures at work or home, in volunteering or care-giving, we need to recognize that all of the work does not belong to us. We need rest and time away. We need the sustenance God gives us to stay afloat. We need to receive the kind of steadfast love God offers, we cannot just give it all the time. Only God can give and give and give. Only God's covenants, like this one with David, are unbreakable. There's accountability when we mess up, but God will still be there with us.

In telling David this one thing was not his to do, God invited David into humility and into trust in someone other than himself. Most importantly, God invited him to rely on the steadfast grace of God. To trust in the love of the God who keeps promises, and builds us up into what we need to be.