



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

What are the Four Things?

SCRIPTURE:
Deuteronomy
6:20-25

May 8, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

At the heart of this text lives a spiritual assumption. Deuteronomy assumes this: If a child is going to become a grown-up in this world and lead a mature life, a life shaped by the ways of God, the child will need some teachers. The child will need some mentors and wisdom handed down from those who have already walked the road. My experience is that there are days when we become the teacher, the mentor, the giver of wisdom, but we never outgrow the need for wisdom from those who have gone before.

Such a worldview is not as common in our day. We tend to be a bit more self-reliant. “I’ll figure this out on my own, thank you very much.” We have a keen eye for the failings of those who have gone before and feel particularly wise in calling them out. But at least in parenting, there are times when handing on wisdom is unavoidable.

When one is a parent, the moments when we are sure of what to do are few and far between. Most of parenting feels like climbing a hill you can never see over. You bring an infant home and you don’t know what to do. You hold them a lot and feed them and change them and get up in the night with them. Before you can get a good night’s sleep, they need school clothes. They go to school and you discover that you need to learn the state capitals all over again and remember your multiplication tables. And on a percentage basis, just how much of a parent’s life do you spend at the 3&2 baseball field or beside the swim-team pool?

Before you can turn around, they are teenagers. The door to their room is closed more times than

not. And it is impossible for you to understand why the world might end because the blue shirt isn’t clean. And in public, you can embarrass them because you are breathing. Then you wake up one morning and they have packed for college and you think that your parenting job is over, but it is far from over.

Parenting, it seems to me, is getting harder all the time. The world is changing so fast. Our children experience things we never imagined. How do we guide them? How do we set them up for a meaningful life?

I am no expert; just ask my children. I am responding to your request¹ not because I am a particularly faithful parent but because I believe parenting from a faith perspective is a particularly good thing.

Deuteronomy says: When your children ask you, “Why do you live the way you do?” When they ask you, “Do we have to go to church?” Tell them what matters to you.

It was summer of 2005 and my daughter Sarah was 13. We were on our way back from Branson, a father-daughter trip I gave her for her birthday. My friend Brant gave me the idea. When it comes to being a dad, he was one of the best I knew. He took a trip with each of his boys when they turned 13. I stole the idea. Sarah and I saw some shows and went swimming in the motel pool, which required a brief stop to the emergency room for a few stitches. We played the funniest round of miniature golf of my life. I think that I got a 12 on one hole. It was a really hard hole. But driving home, with just the two of us in the car and the radio off,

¹ This sermon is part of a series generated by questions submitted by the congregation. One recent Sunday, I mentioned that there was a conversation I had with my children which we simply refer to as the “four things.” I suppose the mystery of that raised enough curiosity that quite a few folks asked, “Tell us what the four things are.” This sermon is a response to that request.

I said, “I need to talk to you. You are growing up and there are some things I need you to know.”

I was apprehensive because I knew she was growing up in a world that I barely understood. I knew that what seemed like wisdom to me, she might deem foolishness—and she might be right. Each generation must find their own wisdom but it is the foolish generation that chooses to do it alone. Like the Deuteronomist, wisdom doesn’t have to be found in a vacuum. We all need mentors.

That’s why we ask parents at the baptismal font, “Will you bring your child up within the community of faith?” Not even parents can do it alone.

Twenty-five years ago my friend Martha said, “Tom, my kids don’t like church very much. It’s a real battle every Sunday. I don’t want to force it on them. I want them to choose church.” That made sense to me. Although, my parents did not have that outlook. You know this: As a child, I went to church wearing a harness. It’s true. I was not the most obedient child—shocking, I know. When I was the oldest of three, all under the age of six, I wore a harness. It had straps that went around my waist, over my shoulders, and with a leash, my mother drug me to church.

Every week: “Mom, do I have to go to church?” “Yes, now put on your harness.”

At that same age, my dad was teaching me about baseball. I still remember what my dad taught me about playing first base: Never stretch until you know where the ball is going to be thrown. But I have to tell you, how well I played first base as a kid matters very little to me now. But I am very clear that the faith that guides me every day first lived in my parents.

Kenda Creasy Dean, professor at Princeton Seminary, shares that the most significant influence in a young person’s faith is the faith of her parents.² Deuteronomy instructs that faith may not become important to our children, but they should know that it is important to us.

Martha said to me, “I don’t want to insist that my kids come to church; I want them to choose it.” I get that, but they need to know it’s important to *you*. There was a time when my kids didn’t care

much for broccoli or algebra or flossing. So, it was my job to tell them why it matters.

We all need wisdom like that. And in time, we become those who offer wisdom, but we never—absolutely never—outgrow the need to gain wisdom from others.

It was the summer of 2007 and my son Nathan was 13. We were on the way back from a father-son trip to St. Louis. We played golf. He made his first par. We saw two games between the Cardinals and the Braves. We got there early to get autographs. On the drive home, I said, “I need to talk to you. There are some things I need you to know.”

If you were going to share advice with your kids or grandkids or a younger person who trusts and looks up to you, what would you say? I’ll tell you what I told mine, not because I recommend it for anyone else but just because it’s the only way I know to tell this biblical passage.

I said, “If you don’t remember anything else from me, I want you to remember these four things. First: You are responsible for yourself. You are the only one who can live your life. Do not place the realities of your life on someone else’s shoulders. You cannot control all the circumstances of your life, but you are the only one who can decide who you will be in the face of life’s circumstances. Understand?” “Yeah, I think so.”

“Secondly, the older you get, the more decisions you need to make. Some of them are big, like where you go to college and who you marry. Some are small, like what you will eat today and whether or not you do your homework. But every decision has consequences. Sometimes the consequences are good; sometimes, not so good. Some consequences can be anticipated and some will catch you by surprise but every decision has consequences. And here is the thing: The consequences are not just for you, but for others. Sometimes the choices you make impact others even more than yourself, so, you have to think about that because the impact your choices have on others...well, that’s on you.” “Okay, Dad.”

“Third, I love you.” “Yeah, Dad, I know.” “Well, I want you to understand this. If in the providence

2 Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (2010), p. 112.

of God, you ever have a child of your own, it's then that you will fully understand what I mean when I say, 'I love you.' I won't get it right all the time. I will disappoint you and at times, you may disappoint me but I will never stop loving you. And if years from now you become a parent, you will know what I am talking about."

"There's one more thing," I said. "It's the most important." "More important than telling me you love me?" "Yes, I think it's even more important than that. I want you to remember every day that you are baptized." And I told them the story.

"The preacher put the water on your head and you screamed like we had stolen your birthday cake. Your mom and I cried tears of joy. We celebrated that you belong to God. I feel like you belong to me; I'm your Dad. But the truth is: You belong to God. Because God is gracious, God has loaned you to me for a season and I no longer know how to think about my life apart from you, but you belong to God. Remember that.

Remember that also means you are called to live like you belong to God. Your life is not your own. You will have a job and maybe a career but that is not why you are in this world. You have been baptized, so you have been called to follow Jesus Christ. That is why you are in this world."

My little ones are grown now, but they still sometimes quote the four things back to me... "Every decision has consequences," he will say.

Sometimes, when we are leaving one another, she just holds up four fingers for the four things.

The good book says when your children ask you, "Why do we live like this?" Tell them what matters to you. The only amendment I would make to the scripture? Don't wait until they ask.

Life is changing and it is not easy to find our way. What the ancients knew is that if a person was going to mature, if a person was going to learn to be a grown-up, they would need some mentors, they would need some teachers, they would need some models. No one can be a model all the time. No one can be the mentor all the time but we all need them.

There is a lot of foolishness in our culture. There is a lot of smallness. There is a lot of meanness and outright dishonesty. And if our children are going to learn to be grown-ups, it's too much to ask them to do it on their own.

So, offer the wisdom that you have. Do so with humility because the day may come when they learn greater wisdom... and also remember, you are not in it alone.

That's why, at the font, we ask parents, "Will you bring your children up in the church, the community of faith...?" because none of us can do it alone. And because there's a church, none of us has to.

So if your children ask you, "Why do you live the way you do?" What will you tell them?