

## Pentecost IX

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*'So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?'* Luke 11:9

I had been pondering this Gospel reading for awhile when, as it happened, I began reading a book about ethics and genetic engineering – a topic that interests me enormously. The book is called **The Case Against Perfection**, by Michael Sandel, a government professor at Harvard.

Sandel's basic argument is that many of the present and anticipated goals of the engineering of human genes conflicts with what he calls "an appreciation of the giftedness of life." This is fundamentally a religious sensibility – at least, it's my religious sensibility. Life is a gift, much of it beyond our control. Biblical stories of disaster, of God's wrath and divine retribution, often concern our human tendency to try to take on divine power, to control what is beyond our scope, to try to *be* God.

Sandel talks about the enhancement of athletic prowess through genetic manipulation, and he talks about eugenics, or the campaign to improve our collective gene pool. But to me his most passionate arguments have to do with what he calls, "Designer Children, Designing Parents." His concerns cover everything from sex-selection to improved college board scores to musical virtuosity; and again, his concern is with the parental obsession with trying to control their children's qualities, abilities, and destinies.

He has several philosophical objections to that obsession. One is, interestingly, the debt or burden that kind of manipulation or control places upon the children of such projects. There's a lack of reciprocity or mutuality, Sandel argues, when parents assume, or try to assume, excessive control over their offspring. There's an undue constraint on a child's freedom to choose his or her own path in life. Of course, we all try to influence our children's choices and values and futures in some ways, that's part of the parental task. The question is one of degree, and Sandel draws a line at genetic manipulation for excellence alone.

But his most compelling point, to me, is that children, really are gifts. And our challenge as parents is to “accept them as they come, not as objects of our design, or products of our will, or instruments of our ambition. . . . That is why parenthood, more than other human relationships, teaches what the theologian William F. May calls ‘an openness to the unbidden.’”

*An openness to the unbidden.* That, really is the challenge of faith, the challenge of relationship, the challenge of community. Certainly, as all of us who are parents know, it’s the challenge of parenthood.

Sandel is not for unconditional love and acceptance alone as the task of parenthood. Again, he quotes theologian May. “Parental love has two aspects: accepting love and transforming love. Accepting love affirms the being of the child, whereas transforming love seeks the well being of the child. Each side of parental love corrects the excesses of the other: . . . Parents find it difficult to maintain an equilibrium between the two sides of love. Accepting love, without transforming love, slides into indulgence and finally neglect. Transforming love, without accepting love, badgers and finally rejects.” To Sandel, genetic engineering to enhance our potential children’s potential excellence veers over the line into excessive control, willfulness, and ambition, which can result in judgment and rejection.

*An equilibrium between the two sides of love,* the accepting and the transformative. Again, isn’t this the challenge of faith, the challenge of relationship, the challenge of community?

How do we give our children, both what they want and what they need? How do we know what’s a fish and what’s a snake, what’s an egg and what’s a scorpion? The choices Jesus offers seem clear and graphic, but in our own lives and relationships the distinctions often are murky, the choices ambiguous, the balance delicate. We want to do our best for our children— at least, we are called by God to want to do our best, to give our best. The challenge is in the discernment, often, and in the balance between acceptance and challenge, or what May and Sandel call transformation.

Years ago I preached a sermon in which I quoted someone in the parish as saying that nothing makes you more vulnerable than having children. Another parishioner, a gay man, partnered but childless, countered that nothing makes you more vulnerable than *not* having children. I took his point. On the one hand, children are indeed our hostages to fortune. On the other, without offspring, we are brought more rudely face to face with our existential aloneness and our mortality.

Sometimes, I know, our recent focus here at St John's on marriage equality has made single people, or partnered but unmarried people, wonder if they are being excluded, ignored, or forgotten. And sometimes our focus on families and children makes childless people feel the same way. And I don't mean to deny any of those feelings. I also know that the symbolic designation of a parish as a family can have troublesome connotations for folks whose associations with their families of origin are very painful or destructive.

Nonetheless, we are called together in community, and we are called to be in relation to one another in ways that I think are well described by Sandel's and May's formulations. How do we give our children, both what they want and what they need? How to give those same gifts to one another? We are called by God to want to do our best, to give our best. The challenge is in the discernment, often, and in the balance between acceptance and challenge, or what May and Sandel call transformation.

Sandel's argument is that human genetic engineering for excellence (as opposed to goals of curing disease, for example) – engineering for excellence tips the balance too far toward mechanistic transformation. But spiritual transformation is another matter; I think we are all called, in Christian community, to engage continually the tasks both of accepting love and transformational love and challenge.

We are also called into community as part of the community of saints: a community that is symbolic as well as historical; and we are called to see one another as members of that community.

When I was rector at All Saints' in Stoneham, the parish was made up primarily of older people who were afflicted with a debilitating nostalgia for the golden days of the 50's and 60's when the parish had been thriving and their children belonged to the biggest youth group in the town. Now their children were scattered to the four winds.

At one vestry meeting the senior warden was reminiscing about the Mothers' Group that used to meet in the parish hall. "But now we have no young mothers," he said. "Look," I said, "there are two young mothers sitting right here! They are on this vestry!"

But because they were not the young mothers he remembered, they didn't count. He literally could not see them. Because the actual children of these elder parishioners were not attending the parish, the elders really did not care about the needs and desires of the younger parishioners. They did not want the parish to grow with new young families, because that meant that the parish would have to change.

The point here, to me, is that in Christian community we are called to be mindful not only of our own biological or adopted children, but of all the children we are blessed to have among us, and to the children in generations to come. As we are children of God, and as we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, we are all also parents in Christ to those who come after us, those in our midst at the moment, and those who will make up the body of Christ in years and generations to come.

It is that call that challenges us continually to maintain the balance between accepting, unconditional love and transformative love. It is that call that keeps our hearts and minds *open to the unbidden*: the unbidden gifts of one another, the unbidden workings of the Holy Spirit. And it is that call which carries with it that most marvelous of holy promises, *Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.*

*Alleluia! Amen*