



Soul Care for the Children of Broken Homes

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Marriage is a beautiful, powerful, and mysterious gift, given by our Lord before mankind's fall. This union of one man and one woman received God's first blessing: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28 ESV). As Walter Trobisch taught, marriage is no causal relationship, but involves the three-fold leaving, cleaving, and one flesh union.¹ So Moses wrote, and Jesus and Paul repeated, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24 ESV).

Consequently, divorce is not the simple dissolution of a contract, but the rending of one body into two. It's similar to the "Texas Chainsaw Massacre" in violence, but worse than any movie in its foundation-shaking aftermath. Perhaps there might be a relieved partner at the dissolution of a troubled marriage, although there is almost always at least one devastated spouse, but the offspring, or adopted child, of that union suffers too. For the child who has been procreated and nurtured in the beautifully designed shelter of the leaving, cleaving, one body union of marriage, divorce of parents is the demolishing of the safe, protecting structure in which he has had time to be a child—protected, confident, and flourishing in the stable certainty of unconditional love. Admittedly, no family perfectly embodies the ongoing love of the Holy Trinity, but the Christian family is meant to endure as a safe refuge: a port of hope, comfort, encouragement, and care in the midst of every storm. Contrast that with Michael Reagan's experience. The President's son painfully described his parents' separation: "Divorce is where two adults take everything that matters to a child—the child's home, family, security, and sense of being loved and protected—and they smash it all up, leave it in ruins on the floor, then walk out and leave the child to clean up the mess."²

¹ Walter Trobisch, *I Married You*, (Bolivar, MO: Quiet Waters, 2000, 1971) p. 29.

² Michael Reagan, *Twice Adopted*, (Nashville: Broadman and Hollman, 2004) p. 37.

Listen to Andrew Root's description of the day when he was in his mid-twenties and his mother announced the divorce of the marriage in which he had been conceived, born, and nurtured:

While she discussed the relief and pain of admitting the defeat of her marriage, I could only feel the defeat of the community that was the source of my very existence. Hearing her quiet, earnest explanation, I could almost feel myself sliding back into nonbeing. I felt numb, cut loose, unbound. My family had never been perfect, but it had been my family. Now that it was falling apart, it seemed as if I had nowhere to stand. It was like the scene late in the movie *Back to the Future*, where Marty begins to become transparent as it looks like he will fail to bring his teenaged parents together. It seemed as if I were fading into nothingness.³

To get a further sense of the child's pain in divorce, also hear Root's poignant account of his youngest sister-in-law's return to what was left of her childhood home. Her parents had divorced, left their hobby farm that was then burned by a fire department and bulldozed. His sister-in-law climbed into the tree house next to the now-bulldozed remains.

As [Callie] sat there, between her tears and breaths she could hear the faint sound of whining. Collecting herself, she climbed down to investigate. It was a cat, and not just any cat, but their family cat, "Momma Cat," who had lived both inside their home and outside in the small barn that had also been burnt to the ground. Standing there looking at Momma Cat, now surrounded by plowed dirt and vacant lots, she felt as lost and utterly abandoned as the cat. Without this place, without this farm, Momma Cat was simply an old stray, worthless to most. Without this place, without *home*, Callie—and Kara and I as well—wondered if in our parents' divorce we had ourselves become strays, people without a place, people without belonging.⁴

³ Andrew Root, *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010) p. xv.

⁴ Root, 120. Note: Root also observes that the natural inclination of children is to be grounded in the union that procreated them, which certainly has implications toward the wellbeing of children in same sex unions and other arrangements. What makes Root's comments on this particularly interesting is that it appears that Root himself does not oppose such other forms of family. But, as is seen often with adopted

A Christian mother, Alice Stolper Pepler, tells of her fears for her children in writing to fellow victims of divorce: “When the marriage chain first broke, your children seemed doomed. Surely this would destroy them! At the very least, they’d never lead normal lives. You could forget about carefree, happy childhood days for them. Theirs would be most unhappy and maladjusted.”⁵ So Christian fathers and mothers—while in shock, pain, and heartbreak at divorce—intercede and seek help for their children who witnessed it.

The consequences of the divorce of parents are not limited to the initial shock. Judith Wallerstein in her book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*, summarizes a twenty-five year study of children of broken homes. She observes that “when children of divorce become adults, they are badly frightened that their relationships will fail, just like the most important relationship in their parents’ lives failed. They mature with a keen sense that their growing-up experiences did not prepare them for love, commitment, trust, marriage, or even for the nitty-gritty of handling and resolving conflicts.”⁶

She also notes that “several people reported that their faith in God was shaken for several years by their experience as children. Most of these were adults who had been abandoned by a parent when they were very young.” Yet many found the community of the church as “a source of comfort.”⁷

“Let the children come to me” (Mark 10:14 ESV) insisted that our Lord Jesus saw children as great in the kingdom of God. He also warned, “See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10 ESV). Soul-care of children is of the utmost importance to Jesus. So the soul-care of children of broken homes is critical for pastors and congregations.

children, the yearning for connection to one’s biological parents is intense. Often, while thankful and content in their present family, the adopted children desire some kind of connection to their biological parents. We might say that their being longs for connection to its origin. Therefore, while family can be defined outside of biological connection (something I affirm), there remains nonetheless a longing for biology to connect its being with the being of those responsible for bringing one into the world. ... I do believe there is something mysterious about the communion of biological father, mother, and child(ren). (Root, xix,xx)

⁵ Alice Stolper Pepler, *Divorce: Surviving the Pain*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1993) p. 39.

⁶ Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), p. xiii.

⁷ Wallerstein, p. xv.

The purpose of this paper is not only to help us empathize with the challenges of children who find that the home in which they live is ripped apart, but also to consider what we might be able to do to be supportive and helpful pastors and neighbors to these children. Andrew Root wisely warns that such a consideration of what we might do to help ought never to be confused as a solution that completely reverses the effects of a divorce on a child. "I fear that in our search to solve problems, we might avoid the heaviness of the issue itself. We may think that, somehow, if we do certain things, everything will be fixed."⁸

Children as Sinned Against

As Dr. Beverly Yahnke has observed, the Church has been good at distributing forgiveness and mercy to those who sin, but it's been easy for us to look past or miss the shame, pain, and suffering of those who have been sinned against. "Sinners need not suffer silently. Sinners need not find their own way out of their pain, anger and helplessness. *That* particular curse seems to be reserved for another group of people. A group of people whom I will call 'the sinned against.'"⁹ One would hope that a friend of Joseph, Jacob's son, when hearing the sins committed against him that destroyed his place at home, then his place at work, letting him languish in pits again and again, would not dismiss all of this cruelty as a mere trifle. That his friend would remain with him and for him, as indeed our Lord Himself did for Joseph.

Insights from a Son of Divorced Parents

Steve Peterson, 64, is a member of Our Savior Lutheran Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is married and has been for 41 years. They have been blessed with five children, four sons and one daughter. All of those children are married and all have children. All regularly attend LCMS congregations. He's been quite active in the life of the congregation, regularly attends the Divine Service, Sunday Bible class (or teaching), and weekly men's Bible study. He also gathers with longtime friends of different Christian backgrounds for a weekly Bible study that has been going on for forty years. He is also the son of divorced parents. Both are now deceased. They split when he was in eighth grade. Steve recalls that both of his parents drank too much. Mom occasionally would have a black eye, evidently from domestic violence from her husband, Steve's dad.

⁸ Root, p. 121.

⁹ Beverly Yahnke, "When God's Good Gifts are Defiled: The Sinner and The Sinned Against," (Presented at the Cranach Institute Conference on September 20, 2006, available at: http://www.cranach.org/imageofgod/papers/yahnke_when_Gods_good_gifts_are_defiled.pdf) p. 4.

Steve reports that mom had quite a biting and sarcastic tongue toward her husband and toward her children as well. "My parent's divorce was a long process with multiple phases (periods of marital problems and fighting, period of separation, period of divorce, period of remarriage [both parents remarried]). The divorce and related family dysfunction often made me feel like I was different or somehow a lesser person or 'from the wrong side of the tracks' in some social settings."¹⁰

Steve reports that he reacted with three powerful questions. "Why me?" "Is it my fault?" "Do I have to choose sides?" These often were the focus of his thinking. "Why me?" was asked in reaction to a feeling of a lost sense of opportunity. Because the family was not only in tension, but also did not manage well, there were few father and son activities, no Boy Scouts, and no involvement with sports. There was always a lack of money and Steve was required to take on increased responsibilities, especially in regard to his younger siblings. Steve reported that he did wonder if it was his fault that his parents grew apart, but this was "usually as a result of mother's ramblings while drunk, but I had enough exposure to other families and perspective to not get pulled too far into that hole." He reported that mother never directly stated that it was Steve's fault, but he often heard his mother's comments as if that were her point. Steve recalls being resentful of his mother's expectation to choose sides, but he would do so because it seemed necessary "to support mother."

As he looks back now, Steve reports that several people and things helped him through his parents' divorce and guided him through life. First, there were some men that he sought out as father role models. Also, "a few unbiased or neutral family members who did not feed the hate/blame loop, but rather were kind and loving with either side of the divide." He drew great comfort from his faith in Christ Jesus, although he did not know much then. Most of the real comfort of the Gospel came through televised Billy Graham crusades, which were the only times Steve could remember hearing about the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ for real sinners. Later on he came to recognize several flaws in Graham's theology, but during high school Graham was his only pastoral support. He was also aided by the knowledge that his parents, though deeply flawed, still loved him and occasionally gave him approval. Throughout his high school and college

¹⁰ Steve Peterson personal interview with David C. Fleming on July 24, 2014. All quotations from this point on with Steve Peterson will be from this same interview. Mr. Peterson gave his approval for this to be shared in this paper and knew that the interview was for the purpose of giving insight into the children's side of divorce and how pastors and the Church might be of help.

years he was firmly convinced that, "I could avoid the mistakes of my parents and do better."

There were several things that were not helpful. "Most of my immediate family, who seemed to have 'a horse in the race' or expected me to share their dislike for the 'bad' parent." Steve did not want to have to take sides. He was convinced it was his responsibility to honor his father and his mother regardless of their flawed behavior. Counseling was not helpful because it was never offered. Pastoral care was non-existent as well. Steve reported that his experiences at the Christian Reformed Church were mainly moral instruction that seemed distant and removed from his situation. The pastor never personally talked to him. Mother's reporting of the pastor's advice was that she should get divorced. There were no pastoral attempts to reconcile the marriage. The legal system was not helpful. "Friend of the court did little to enforce child support when my dad quit paying."

It is astounding how the Lord was able to see Steve Peterson through the challenges of an alcoholic and broken home and give him a solid and steadfast foundation in the Gospel of Christ, especially when his pastor and congregation failed to be of any help. As Steve is fond of saying, the Lord can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. But the challenges of his adolescence and the burdens of the younger children of divorced homes, which have recently occurred in the congregation I serve, call me to examine what pastors and congregations can do to serve in these difficult situations.

The Church as Family in the Midst of Hardship

There is no Scripture in either the Old Testament or New Testament that appears to directly speak to the children of divorced parents. There are, of course, passages about divorce. There are also many passages about children. But there are no passages about divorce *and* children. Perhaps the dissolution of a fruitful home was unthinkable in Moses' day and at the time of the apostles. But there is an interesting collection of ideas in close proximity in Mark's account of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. At the beginning of chapter ten Jesus teaches about marriage and divorce (verses 1-12). Then Jesus indignantly rebukes His disciples for keeping children away from Him and blesses the children (verses 13-16). Next is the encounter with the rich young man who leaves sorrowful and Jesus' teaching about the spiritual challenge of wealth (verses 17-27). Then Peter pipes up, calling to our Lord's attention the disciples' abandonment of earthly gifts to follow Him. "See, we have left everything and followed you" (Mark 10:28 ESV).

Jesus' answer is a fascinating promise that exhibits both sympathy for the burdens His disciples bear and abundant gifts for their lives now and eternally. "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30 ESV).

Christ Jesus' promise is bold and universal to all believers: "Amen! I say to you, there is *no one* who has left...*who will not receive!*" This comforting promise is made in immediate context of the deprivations that have come upon Jesus' followers, but also in the larger context of Christ's blessing for children and His teaching against divorce. It is probably too great a stretch to say that this context proves that this bold promise of home and family is especially for children of divorced homes. However, our Lord does open our eyes to a new reality that comes through our living baptismal connection with Him. We are not alone. Christians are placed into community with one another. We are promised, in this life, "houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children," in other words, that which gives families a place and fills that place with permanent and substantial relationships.

During His crucifixion, our Lord showed that familial relationships are not beneath His notice. He directed John and Mary to each other as son and mother.¹¹ His cross became the site for the formation of a new home in which two burdened and mourning Christians would be gifted with consolation and community. This echoes the new families formed at the first Passover when families too small to consume a lamb joined with neighbors in one home.¹² This same formation of a new familial table was accomplished by Jesus when He gathered His apostles in the upper room on the night of His betrayal.

Through the saving work of Christ not only is sin forgiven, salvation won, death defeated, and hope given; but also, our Savior gifts us with strong bonds of love that unite all ages together into a new family. What Christian has not experienced the joy of being encouraged and comforted by fellow baptized members of Christ's body? Root believes that real congregations are communities able to provide stability and love to those damaged by divorce.

¹¹ John 19:26-27

¹² Exodus 12:4, "And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb" (ESV).

It must be a community that knows life and death, a community that seeks to be real in light of the unreal. It must be a community that proclaims that in its life, in its actions of being with and for one another, it participates in the fullness of God's love for the world. It must be a community that is not constituted in functions, but like the family is based in persons, and has the goal of loving and being with one another. It must be a community that...asserts and witnesses in its life that it "knows a power that runs even deeper than a mother's love."¹³

Through the means of regular pastoral care—liturgy, Scripture reading, preaching, baptizing, celebration of the blessed Sacrament of the Altar, and catechizing—the Lord provides His church stability, peace, hope, joy, wisdom, mercy, kindness, forgiveness, and the cleansing of shame. These gifts are needed by us all. Through this ongoing relationship with our Lord, the children of broken homes, and those who mourn with them, are surrounded by signs, words, and actions that give them a stable place wherein the Lord Jesus meets them with His mercy. As many people with different needs, illnesses, and spiritual afflictions were brought to Jesus, and He ministered to all according to His Divine insight into their need, so at the family gathering of the Divine Service all the hurting are met by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to receive help in every time of need.

In 1993, at the Christmas Midnight Divine Service, a petition from *Worship Supplement* (1969) for the children of broken homes was included in the Prayer of the Church. A set of grandparents were thankful then and remain so to this day, still remembering that their grandchildren's painful situation was acknowledged publicly by their church and brought before their incarnate God. Not knowing the vast array of challenges, burdens, sins, illnesses, and heartbreaks that are brought by the folks who attend the Divine Service, pastors need to avoid what is trite and shallow, and deliver the solid, stable, and real gifts of Christ to His people. As Yahnke warns:

[O]ne will not seek help in the community of a church that doesn't understand suffering. Some churches would have us believe that church is an upbeat place for happy people because God has promised to be with his people, thereby insulating them from

¹³ Root, p. 121.

sorrow. Sometimes I fear that the new churchly culture of “I Love Jesus sing and sway music,” doctrinal McNuggets in the sermon, and special machines that launch confetti during the glorias sends the wrong message to people who suffer. You have no idea how many people I treat clinically who cannot and who will not go to church because they tell me that they would have to ‘fake being happy’ and explain to everyone who *is* happy why they are not happy. ‘It’s just too hard to go to church,’ say the sinned against. A church community and her pastor must know about suffering.¹⁴

While the Divine Services are deeply meaningful and helpful—as Jesus Himself comes to hear the cries of His people, absolve them, speak to them, and touch them—family life includes more than just regular pastoral care. There are several things that pastors and congregations can offer to care for the children of broken homes.

Listen

How challenging it can be to simply listen! How critical it is to soul care for those who suffer. Here Dr. Yahnke makes a powerful case for listening by insightfully describing the desires of the listener to quit listening.

We fail to listen. We’re so eager to stop the outpouring of pain that we fill the air with words. Our words. We launch an armada of words, surrounding the sinned against with our experience, our wisdom, our impressions, our explanations and our action plan. Yet, from the time of the ancient church fathers to the present research regarding effective therapeutic practice, the role of listening in silence to the wounded soul has been touted as essential. We need to let others tell their story without interruption, without editorial insertions, without prejudice. We are so well educated and so compassionate that we feel it somewhat foolish to sit idly while someone weeps, choking on the fact filled story he must tell. We want to stop the sobbing and move people beyond their pain. We want to take charge and rescue the person. We are wrong to do so, tears and talking are remarkably cleansing. We’ve got to change our philosophy of helping: people don’t need a good talking to, they need a good listening to. And the heart that has

¹⁴ Yahnke, p. 6.

been heard will feel a debt of respect, deep appreciation and affection when the gift of listening has been given.¹⁵

Solomon, when invited by the Lord to ask for anything, asked for a “listening heart.” “Solomon asked to be a good hearer, a true listener with an open mind and a clear conscience. If Solomon had the gift of a hearing heart, he would be able to discern the character of people and see them as God saw them. He would be able to hear properly, without becoming distracted by guilt, fear, anger, and anxiety.”¹⁶ Such a gift of a hearing heart would be of benefit to children who are hurt by divorce and perhaps injured by the trouble that led to divorce.

Root urges pastors of children to “work to know the stories (even in their brokenness) of the young people with whom you work. It is amazing how often youth workers, children’s ministers, and pastors know little of the story of the people they serve. Make it a major driving force of your ministry to know people’s stories.”¹⁷ In order to hear their stories, Root suggests that pastors be

. . . willing to approach tweens and teens to communicate your understanding of their situation. It may at first feel invasive to ask young people to speak about the event. But by simply saying, “Hey, I know this is a really hard time,” we are communicating that we see. It need not be an overly drawn-out encounter (as a matter of fact, that may be counterproductive), but a simple word that says that you see how difficult this situation is can go a long way, by witnessing to the young person that he or she is not alone.¹⁸

Root also recommends that youth be surrounded by older members as well. Teach older members the great value in hearing and speaking with young people. This further grounds the child within his church family.

In the process of pastoral listening there will be opportunities to offer private confession and absolution to cleanse the child’s conscience for sins he has committed. When one is sinned against it is often answered by more sin. Here confession and absolution is the answer in delivering Jesus’ personal word of pardon and peace. But there will also likely be shame over things that the child

¹⁵ Yahnke, p. 12.

¹⁶ John W. Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace: Spirituality for Today* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008) p. 88.

¹⁷ Root, p. 132.

¹⁸ Root, p. 127.

has no control over. The shame of being the child of a divorce, the shame of having witnessed cutting words and quiet resentment between his parents, and the shame of having a parent or both parents who, in a public, selfish, and ugly way, sinned against the marriage and family. Here the shame-releasing blood of Jesus needs to be applied.

In Numbers 19:11-22, the Lord gives a rite for the cleansing of those who have touched a dead person and for the tent in which a person died. The Lord teaches that death is not natural; there is a shame, an uncleanness that surrounds death. Even the home, the tent itself, is made unclean by death. The Lord gives the ashes of a red heifer mixed with water as a cleansing agent. (The connections of the red heifer with the coming Christ are quite rich, but it is enough to note that both died outside the city and are sacrificed whole.) The ashes mixed with water were to be sprinkled on the people and things made unclean by death on the third and seventh days. The mourner and his home are thus, by the Lord's Word, cleansed from death's shame.

Similarly, the death of a marriage and the breaking apart of a home bring uncleanness and shame to those around it. We don't have ash-water to sprinkle on the third and seventh days, but we do have the better cleansing of Jesus' blood. "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" 1 John 1:7 ESV. And John also connects this with the cleansing from all sins done against us, as he writes in verse 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and *to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*" (ESV).

Teach the children of broken homes to see in their baptism and in the Sacrament of the Altar the powerful cleansing blood of Jesus that cleanses them from all unrighteousness—not just their own sins, but also the sins committed against them and around them. Also, that through these gifts the Lord Himself gathers us all together as His children and His family at His family table in His home which will never be broken.

Encourage the child to receive absolution and cleansing through the rite of Individual Confession and Absolution (LSB 292). This rite will clear the child's conscience of his sins and offer an opportunity to apply Jesus' word of cleansing to remove shame. After the absolution give a blessing to deliver Jesus' cleansing from the shame of sins done to the child and to establish the child again in the firm house of the Lord.

Surrogate Families

As I look back over the last twenty years at the congregation I serve, I can see an interesting pattern. There have consistently been children our children's ages who have been in our home on a regular basis. In almost every case these children are from homes of troubled, separated, deceased, or divorced parents. Rarely have our children been guests in their homes. In hindsight it appears that these children were longing for a stable and safe place. They tended to enjoy the interaction of all ages—especially in games together and meals together. While I certainly could have done a better job of leading a family devotional life, to the extent that we participated in prayers, readings, and hymns, from my observation they never complained or rolled their eyes. They often were quite engaged in Christian conversation as we together talked about issues or people. Regardless of what we talked about, these young people grew in friendship with our children, but also in relationship with my wife and me as a sort of spiritual mother and father.

When one of these young men began a new dating relationship, invariably he'd bring her to our home to play games with our children. Nearly every time my wife and I would be welcomed into the conversation and get to know the new girlfriend. Later we learned that this was a completely intentional act by the young man. He wanted his girlfriend to see a real family in action and to see how she would interact with us. Looking back it was no surprise that our home became the regular stopping place when this young man and his fiancée would come back from college. Conversations about marriage and relationships eventually led to premarital counseling and the opportunity to officiate at their out-of-state wedding at her home Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregation. Throughout this, there were abundant opportunities to pray with and pray for, to bless and encourage, to listen, to absolve, and to cleanse.

In their interacting with the children of broken homes, Steve suggests five points that he would like pastors to consider as goals for their ongoing work with the children. First, the children need to know that their parents still do love them. Steve speaks eloquently:

Sadly, even the most well-intentioned adults who love their children and desire good things for them will nonetheless still be subject to their own sin nature and make multiple bad and self-centered life choices that may lead to divorce and/or other significant damaged family relationships. See it for what it is, a lack of maturity, a lapse of judgment, or even a serious personal

character flaw, but almost always it is *not* a lack of love for their child. I think most children still badly need the love and approval of their parents—no matter how flawed that parent or their expression of that love may be.

Second, eventually children need to be encouraged to forgive and love their parents unconditionally. However, we must be extremely careful not to force a quick and phony forgiveness. A good pastoral desire to heal through forgiveness is well-intentioned, but forced too quickly can truncate a full hearing of the child's suffering. "Looking back now, I can see that my parents were immature, made numerous bad choices, both became alcoholics, and were often neglectful of parental responsibilities. I was often hurt by them and very angry with them, but I never doubted that they still loved me, nor did I hate them—even though, in retrospect, forgiving them was a lengthy process."

Third, children need to understand that they are not the cause of their parents' divorce. Children have sinned against their parents and can be selfishly divisive and manipulative with their parents, but these sins are not the cause of the divorce. For the guilt over these sins against the parents it would be good for pastors to deliver Christ's absolution directly.

Fourth, children of divorce will need to identify what is bad about their family's pattern and seek the Lord's help to not emulate it. Steve and his wife, Linda, have often played a very useful game with their children. They call it Foolish-Normal-Wise-Man. The idea is that the foolish person is the one who repeats a detrimental behavior expecting different results. The normal person is the one who, after making a bad choice, learns from it and does not repeat it. The wise person is the one who, after observing others making bad choices or by learning from others, avoids that which is harmful and embraces that which is good. Steve and Linda would often invite their children to analyze their behavior or the behavior of others—on TV, in literature, in real life—to use these opportunities to think ahead and plan. Use the Foolish-Normal-Wise-Man game to analyze what can be learned from the marriage of parents and of others.

Fifth, encourage and guide children of divorce to build relationships with good role models.

Steve Biddulph, in his popular books, *Raising Boys* and *Raising Girls*, suggests that the loss of a father's daily interaction with their sons and daughters because of divorce is particularly harmful to children.

For a daughter, “Not being loved by a dad can make a girl not love herself. Moms can compensate for this, but not completely.” “Just as for the mother when a marriage breaks down, the children often blame themselves for a breakdown in their relationship with their dad; daughters conclude that ‘if dad is too busy to have time for me, it must be that I am boring and not worth it.’”¹⁹ On the other hand, if “he takes her to the mall on Saturday to get a glue gun, and stops off for a hot chocolate or ice cream on the way home, she can’t avoid the conclusion that she is interesting for her own sake: ‘He likes my company!’ She notices that he is not hurrying, that she is not a task he has to cross off his list. She is the destination.”²⁰

Biddulph contrasts this with the interaction of a divorced father with his daughter. They were “sitting in a coffee shop. But they are not talking. He is holding the newspaper in front of him like a big wall. His daughter, nursing her coffee, looks like she would rather be a thousand miles away.”²¹

His suggestion to help daughters who do not have a dad who is around much is to:

Recruit men you can really trust to be interested in her, teach her, and spend time with her. Grandfathers and uncles will be cautious about showing an interest, especially when she is in her teens, but if you ask them, she will benefit from their teaching her to do things, talking and laughing with her, being involved in her life. (Don’t leave her with grown-up men on her own, but stay nearby, and both will feel safer and more at ease.) Men often need to be asked; it engages their ‘practical help’ gene and they do a great job.²²

The surrogate family of the Christian church provides the opportunity to find well-qualified men to serve as surrogate fathers, grandfathers, and uncles.

For under-fathered boys the deficits are disturbing. Biddulph catalogs the four behaviors that indicate an under-fathered boy.

¹⁹ Steve Biddulph, *Raising Girls: How to Help Your Daughter Grow Up Happy, Healthy, and Strong* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014), p. 187.

²⁰ Biddulph, *Raising Girls*, p. 188.

²¹ Biddulph, *Raising Girls*, p. 188.

²² Biddulph, *Raising Girls*, p. 195.

- An aggressive style of relating
- Hyper-masculine behavior and interests (guns, muscles, monster trucks, death)
- Extremely limited repertoire of behavior (standing around grunting and being “cool”)
- Derogatory attitude toward women, gays and minorities

...The aggressive style of relating is a boy’s cover-up for feeling unsure of himself. Lacking praise and respect from older males, he puts on a tough act. The rule is, put down someone else before he puts you down. If a boy has little contact with his father or other men, then he doesn’t really know how to be a man. He doesn’t have the words, the insights into himself, or a handle on his feelings. Because he’s never seen it done, he doesn’t know how to deal with conflict in a good humored-way, talk to women easily and without being sexist, or express appreciation or sadness, or to say sorry.²³

Biddulph urges that if the father is not involved, that other men be engaged in the rearing of boys. The boys need male role models—father, uncle, older friend, teacher—who will give praise to him.

If a father, uncle, or older friend praises a boy, this automatically widens that boy’s self-image. Imagine the family is coming home from a barbecue with friends. The dad says casually, “You were really good with the little kids, organizing that soccer game. They loved it!” The boy drinks the compliment in deep. (His mother could have said the same thing, but in the teens this would not have gone in so deeply.)

A male teacher or a friend sees the boy tapping on the table in a complex rhythm: “You know, you could be a drummer—that’s a really hard rhythm.’ Such a comment boosts the boy’s sense of himself. He is less dependent on peer approval and more willing to take risks.²⁴

²³ Biddulph, Steve, *Raising Boys: Why Boys Are Different—and How to Help Them Become Happy and Well-Balanced Men*, (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2013), p. 162.

²⁴ Biddulph, *Raising Boys*, p 163.

Imagine the rich opportunities in the church community to provide boys with positive male role models who will encourage them in receiving the Lord's gifts and serving their neighbors. Pastors will want to follow Saint Paul's direction to Titus to exhort old men, who will be role models to others, to "be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience" (Titus 2:2 NKJV). Biddulph shares a report of the impact of one male art teacher at a large country high school. This man had a good-hearted personality. He had kids of his own and was "warm, positive, and bit stern. He had interests that the kids respected. He organized school surfing competitions, was an avid surfer, and liked the outdoors. The result: a sudden upsurge of boys' painting, sculpture, and creativity, which lasted several years after this man left the school."²⁵

There is guidance for women in Holy Scripture for their blessed service as surrogate mothers and grandmothers. Saint Paul directs Titus to delegate to the older women the care and assistance of the younger women. Titus is to instruct "the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed" (Titus 2:3-5 NKJV).

Prayer

In the pastoral care of children of broken homes, the pastor will want to help model and lead the child in prayer. The Psalms are a rich source of prayer. They give us a way to pray to our Lord using the very words our Lord has given us to pray. Psalm 27 testifies to the certainty and comfort provided in the Lord's care, protection, and house. Fittingly for children who feel they are locked in their room in which everything is broken, this Psalm even speaks of abandonment by parents, "When my father and my mother forsake me, Then the LORD will take care of me" (Psalm 27:10 NKJV).

The pastor will also want to draw out of the child whatever pain or anger and help the child to direct these in prayer to the Lord. Here the Psalms of lament are an invaluable tool. They demonstrate that there is no feeling that occurs in our lives that is neither outside the experience of faithful believers before us nor outside the knowledge of our Lord who loves and intercedes for us. As Bonhoeffer writes, "The Psalter gives us ample instruction in how to come before

²⁵ Biddulph, *Raising Boys*, p 164.

God in a proper way, bearing the frequent suffering which this world brings upon us. Serious illness and severe loneliness before God and men, threat, persecution, imprisonment, and whatever conceivable peril there is on earth are known by the Psalms (13, 31, 35, 41, 44, 54, 55, 56, 61, 74, 79, 86, 88, 102, 105 etc.)."²⁶

These Psalms give the child of God a way to express the struggle, anxiety, and doubt that comes from deep hurt and the seeming abandonment by God. "But even in the deepest hopelessness God alone remains the one addressed." Through the Psalms we cast every care on the Lord: "We can no longer bear it, take it from us and beat it yourself, you alone can handle the suffering." "They pray concerning the one who took upon himself our diseases and bore our infirmities, Jesus Christ. They proclaim Jesus Christ to be the only help in suffering, for in him God is with us."²⁷

These Psalms, and our whole life, find their hope and fulfillment in Jesus who "has suffered every want and has brought it before God, has prayed for our sake in God's name: 'Not my will, but thine be done.' For our sake he cried on the cross: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' Now we know that there is no longer any suffering on earth in which Christ will not be, suffering with us and praying with us—Christ the only helper." For the suffering Christian, even in the valley of the shadow of the death of a marriage, may know he is not alone. He who "knows that God has entered into our suffering in Jesus Christ himself may say with great confidence: 'Thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me'."²⁸

Blessing

The Lord has provided us with His Name to bless and empower His children according to His Holy Word and rich promises. In providing soul care for those in all manner of stations and situations, the blessing of Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is a real deliverance of His saving help, protection, and strength. The weak and vulnerable receive in the blessing the very regard of the Lord of the cosmos, the very Lord Jesus who suffered Himself everything they suffer and more. In his helpful and enriching lecture on blessing, John Kleinig

²⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) p. 46.

²⁷ Bonhoeffer, p. 48.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, p. 49.

encourages the blessing of young people—an encouragement especially suited to young people who no longer live with both parents.

Many of them do not just suffer lack of proper personal attention from adults; they miss their father's blessing, his approval of them and affirmation of what is good in them. Even if they do not lack this kind of attention from parents and adults, they still respond powerfully to a blessing from a pastor as from God. I experienced the impact of such a pastoral benediction some years ago when a pastor blessed one of my children. So why not take the opportunities provided by a home visit, or confirmation instruction, or preparation for marriage, or any such occasion, to take young people aside and bless them by saying, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you always?*²⁹

Kleinig teaches that, at times, a problem with blessing is that it is too general. But by connecting an appropriate promise from Holy Scripture to a blessing, the blessing is specific to the need at hand. So, for example, when meeting with those who are mourning a death, a blessing could be structured this way: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted," before I gave the Aaronic benediction or any other benediction to them."³⁰

A promise from Holy Scripture that would be appropriate to use in blessing a child burdened by a broken home would be 1 John 1:9 or Psalm 27:10, especially the second half of the verse: "For my father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in" (ESV). Such a blessing might be something like this: *Name*, Your gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, promises you that He will take you into His home, into His care. Receive His blessing as Your heavenly Father's dear child through the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ by the His Holy Spirit who has given you faith and new life in Holy Baptism. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you!

In Stephen Starke's thoughtful and beautiful hymn *In the Shattered Bliss of Eden* we're drawn to see God's rich mercy in answering our first parents' rebellion. "As He took their leafy garments / And he clothed their shame with skin." In the

²⁹ John W. Kleinig, "Pastoring by Blessing", Australian Lutheran College Inaugural Lecture, February 2, 2009, p. 11.

³⁰ Kleinig, "Pastoring by Blessing", p. 7.

second stanza Starke covers life in this broken world in succinct and poignant words:

Days and months and years unfolding
Clearly showed what sin had wrought:
Fallen Adam's children learning
Lessons fallen parents taught.³¹

Thankfully, it is the Lord Himself, who answered all our sin with “the purest stream of love, Love that robes us with the raiment Worn by all who feast above.” He takes our sin, our self-made garments. He clothes our shame. He cleanses within. It is He who intercedes for us as our High Priest and prays for the children who have been adopted into His eternal family, even as they bear the burden of broken earthly homes.

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³¹ Stephen P. Starke, “In the Shattered Bliss of Eden,” in *Lutheran Service Book* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006) 572.

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