



AFFIRMING PARENTS

By Marilyn Sharpe

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God...

I John 4:7

On a recent flight with only 50 passengers, three of them one-year olds, I had the opportunity of a lifetime! One little guy, clearly in pain, cried all the way up, all the way down, and much of the time in between. Loving parents soothed with hushes, rocking, reading, diverting, snacks, a bottle, a sippy cup ... all to no avail. He was miserable. He was tired. (Did I mention we had to be at the airport by 6:00am?)

When the "fasten seat belts" sign went off, I went to find the parents, to tell them what outstanding parents they were, to thank them for modeling patient, loving parenting for all of the rest of us. They seemed almost weak with relief that I had not come to scowl or scold. I told them what I know to be true: parenting is the hardest ... and most important ... job they would ever do, and would pay dividends for the next 90 years!

I found the other parents near the tail of the plane with their newly one-year old twins and complimented their non-anxious, loving, resourceful parenting, under much-less-than-ideal circumstances. I knew how many parent-hours it had taken to be on that flight and how exhausted they must be. I left them smiling, too.

Almost four years ago, I wrote a very different column about another flight, another one-year old. Our entire family traveled with our one-year old grandson to Dayton, Ohio for his great-grandfather's 90th birthday. Hayden cried going up, coming down, and much of the time in between. His loving, resourceful parents had planned to keep him soothed, amused, and sucking, trying to prevent the ear pain that clearly won. At the end of the flight, a woman's harsh criticism ripped my beloved son and daughter-in-law for not drugging Hayden. It was a miserable start to our trip.

But this was my chance to be a different woman, one who would support and encourage and affirm parents. It is an opportunity all of us have to show the love of God in very hard times. Will you join me "catching" parents being wonderful with their children under very challenging circumstances? You won't have to wait long or look far and wide.

At the grocery store, I witnessed a mom, cart filled at the dinner hour, dealing with a meltdown by her three year old. Mom gently lowered her sobbing child to the floor, knelt with her arms around her, told her she knew how hard this was, how tired and hungry she must be. The sobs subsided and I touched the mother's back, thanking her for heroic parenting, reminding all of us how, at its best, caring for little ones is to be done.

Last December, a dad was in line at Target, cart full of gifts, to check out with his four-year old. The little boy's whimper rose to a howl. Dad pulled the cart out of line, found a quiet place between clothes racks, and held his son until the sadness receded. I went to find that dad, too, and tell him what a superb job he was doing.

After worship each Sunday, I go looking for the parents there with little ones, to thank them for worshipping with their children. I know how hard it is to invest this love and time to help our youngest children learn how to worship, learn how important God is to their parents, and experience the love of parents and love of God together. It radically increases the chance that their child will be a follower of Jesus and be engaged in a worshipping community as an adult.

Why do I bother? Because I was once that parent of young children, feeling judged, not supported, and I would have given anything for a few kind, understanding words. Oh, I tried parenting with the "audience" in mind, but not once did anyone offer to come home and parent my child, affirm me, or approve of the way I was handling it. Parenting differently, with the judgmental audience in mind, just confuses kids and they don't know what to expect. So let's support parents who have the courage and consistency to be loving to their children in the challenging times. Then, we, too, get to love one another as God first loved us.

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

1. Parent your children as you'd like them to be loved, respected, affirmed, and corrected ... not for the "audience."
2. Look for opportunities to affirm parents for their good parenting. "Catch them being good!"
3. Express compassion to parents whose kids are having a meltdown.
4. Affirm how hard ... and how vitally important ...this job of parenting is.
5. Offer help and support. Smile at children and their parents.