Dodging the Parenting Trap:
Mimetic Theory’s Wisdom for Parents

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# Table of Contents

**Introduction: Parenting, Pillow Fights, and Mimetic Theory**

**Part 1: Mimetic Desire**

- **Chapter 1:** For the Joy of Parenting: Desire, Penguins, and Roller Coasters
- **Chapter 2:** What Do You Want?: Nintendo, Power Struggles, and the Positive Intention of Desire
- **Chapter 3:** More Than Meets the Eye: Transformers and Desire
- **Chapter 4:** On Being a Good Dad: Mimetic Desire, Toys, and How Not To Be a Good Neighbor
- **Chapter 5:** Paddle Boards, Mimetic Desire, and Balancing Faith
- **Chapter 6:** How a Child Redeemed the Sins of His Father
- **Chapter 7:** The Day My Boys Picked George Washington’s Nose
- **Chapter 8:** Why the Elf on the Shelf Can Stay

**Part 2: Rivalry and Scapegoating**

- **Chapter 9:** Parenting FAIL: Power Struggles and Empathy
- **Chapter 10:** Parenting Dilemma: Two Brothers and One Girlfriend
- **Chapter 11:** How To Parent Like a Boss (And Shop Like One Too)
- **Chapter 12:** God, Rivalry, and College Football
- **Chapter 13:** The Day I Became Darth Vader
- **Chapter 14:** The Hellish Dreams of a Parent: Why CS Lewis Was Wrong about Hell and Free Will
- **Chapter 15:** The Day I got Pissed at Jesus: An Account of Mimetic Rivalry
- **Chapter 16:** Getting It “Right”: Parenting Easter Grace, and Friendly Glances

**Part 3: Revelation**

- **Chapter 17:** When Children Reveal the Kingdom of Heaven
- **Chapter 18:** Mickey Mouse, Mimetic Theory, and Saving a Villain
- **Chapter 19:** And If I die Before I Wake: On Death and Praying with Children
- **Chapter 20:** How to Defeat Evil: My Daughter, the Star Wars Myth, and Jesus
- **Chapter 21:** Good Friday, Superheroes, and Blueberry Stains
- **Chapter 22:** Father’s Day Sermon: Who’s Your Daddy? Reflections on a Deadbeat god
- **Chapter 23:** Rock, Paper, Scissors, GOD!: Children and a Nonviolent Reading of the Bible

**Conclusion: Wait! One More Thing – Remember to Relax**
Introduction: Parenting, Pillow Fights, and Mimetic Theory

I caught them in the act!

As I walked past our art table, my oldest child and my daughter were quietly working on art projects together. They were drawing on paper and sharing markers. I took a deep breath to savor the moment as I watched. Parenting is filled with sweet times such as these.

But, as every parent knows, those sweet moments don’t last forever. A mere twenty minutes later, my sweet, innocent children were not so sweet and innocent. We had moved downstairs to our dining room and living room area. I was writing an article about how adorable my children are, when they decided to have a pillow fight in our living room.

“You guys,” I warned them, “someone always gets hurt when you have pillow fights.”

“No one will get hurt this time Dad,” my eldest child said with excitement in joyful anticipation of whacking his brother in the face with a pillow.

So, I let the epic battle begin. They laughed as they playfully exchanged blows. I occasionally looked up from my writing to make sure they weren’t getting too rowdy.

I looked up just in time to watch my oldest swing his pillow with all his might at his brother. He missed his target, but struck the lamp. We all watched as it fell in slow motion to the ground and burst into hundreds of little pieces.

They gasped. I stood up and walked over to them, saying, “Okay, everyone stay calm!” And by everyone I mostly meant myself. Stay calm, Adam, I thought to myself. Your children are more important than a lamp.

“I’m so sorry Dad!” my oldest said with agonizing regret. “We will never have another pillow fight again! I swear!”

I’m sure you’ve heard that one before.

Then my daughter chimed in as she pointed at my middle child. “He did it!” she yelled. She didn’t want to get blamed, so she immediately deflected blame onto her brother. I was initially surprised that she blamed this particular brother, since I actually saw her older brother hit the lamp! But my daughter’s accusation reveals a general truth about being human. Unfortunately, when it comes to who gets
blamed, guilt and innocence don’t really matter. What matters for most of us isn’t the truth. What matters is that we don’t get stuck with the blame. And so we shift the blame onto someone else.

“We don’t need to blame anyone,” I responded. “This is just what happens when we have pillow fights. Either someone gets hurt or lamps get broken. So, I don’t think we should have pillow fights anymore.”

“I’m so sorry Dad!” exclaimed my middle child. “It’s my fault!”

“No it’s not,” I told him. “I saw your brother hit the lamp.”

“But it was my idea!” my middle child replied. “So it’s my fault!”

“It’s okay,” I responded. “Let’s just not do it again.”

My oldest was near tears. I picked him up and gave him a hug, telling him it was going to be okay and that nothing he could ever do would make me love him less. That’s when I earned parenting points for showing unconditional love! Right? But then he said, “Thanks, Dad. I won’t blame my brother either.”

“What do you mean?” I asked incredulously. “Of course you won’t blame your brother. I saw you hit the lamp with your pillow.”

“No I didn’t! He did it!”

That’s when I became angry and lost my parenting points. He continued to insist that his brother broke the lamp, and I continued to insist that I saw him strike the lamp with his pillow. My anger escalated as I told him that he wasn’t in trouble for breaking the lamp, but that he would be in trouble if he kept lying about it! He continued to blame his brother, I grunted in frustration (apparently I become a Caveman when I’m angry), and fortunately we both walked away before the situation escalated further.

Forgiveness

I start this introduction with this story because, let’s face it, parenting is hard. I’m not perfect. I’ve made many mistakes, as you will read throughout this ebook. I’ve yelled and sent my children to time out. I’ve since learned that they are never they ones who need a time out; rather, I’m the one who needs a time out. I’m the one who need a little alone time to calm down and think about how I’ve modeled for my children how to be overco

But the fact that I’m not a perfect parent doesn’t matter to my children. Sure, I make mistakes. I’ve yelled and have had some other moments that I’d rather not tell you about ... but I will tell you about them and what I’ve learned from my mistakes. But throughout those mistakes, my children have taught me my most important lesson.
They have taught me how to be forgiven. I don’t want to glorify my children. They aren’t perfect angels, but they routinely model divine forgiveness. For example, 15 minutes after my oldest child broke the lamp, I was still very frustrated with him. When I came back to talk with him, he had already moved on to playing more peaceful games with his siblings. He walked to me, gave me a hug, and said, “I love you so much, Dad.”

The Gospel of Matthew tells a story about Jesus and children that tells us how important children are to our lives. For Jesus, having children around wasn’t important so that churches could have a thriving children and family ministry and boost church attendance. Children are much more important than that. In fact, the kingdom of heaven belongs to children, and to those who have child-like hearts.

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hand on them and went on his way.*

As revealed by Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is based on forgiveness. In fact, just a few short paragraphs before Jesus held up children as models for the kingdom of heaven, he told his disciples that they must forgive others not seven times, but “seventy seven times.” In my experience of parenting, children are the supreme models who naturally reveal what divine forgiveness is all about.

So, I’m an imperfect parent. Even when I try to stay calm, I mess up. And when I do, my children are quick to forgive, modeling for me the kingdom of heaven.

**Mimetic Theory: An Introduction**

This leads me to something called mimetic theory, the theory of human behavior behind this parenting book. Mimetic theory was first articulated by René Girard in his books *Deceit, Desire and the Novel, Violence and the Sacred*, and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Girard has since expanded and corrected some of his thoughts, but the theory has remained essentially the same since he began expounding it in the 1960s. The following is a brief summary of the theory’s three main principles that you will find running throughout this book.

*The first part claims* that human desire is mimetic – that’s just a fancy word for “imitative.” The Girardian formula for this is that we desire according to the desire of another. In other words, we want what another person has. The truth is that we really do want to “keep up with the Joneses.” A classic example comes from the world of children. If you were to put a child into a room full of toys, she will start to play with one of them. When another child enters the room, she will ignore all other toys and go to the toy that the first child is playing with. That toy has increased value because a child is already playing with it. As the second girl attempts to play with the toy, the first girl’s desire for it escalates and she tries to hold onto it tighter. And the more the first girl holds onto the toy, they more the second girl wants to take it.

The example of toys still holds today, but my children mostly fight over the television remote. “I had it first!” “Well, it’s my turn!” You may have heard that conversation before...
But adult desire works in the same way. For example, when I graduated from college I decided to take a few years off before going to graduate school. I landed a temporary job working in a large business where we filed paperwork.

All. Day. Long.

It was repetitive, menial work. Many of my colleagues were in their 30s and 40s and had worked there for years. But one of our co-workers had recently graduated from high school. He was 19 and had worked there for just a year. This young man quickly climbed the corporate ladder to become the assistant manager of the department.

As you can easily imagine, our older colleagues who had worked there for multiple years weren’t happy to be taking orders from a 19 year old kid. They were resentful. They thought that they should be the assistant manager, not this kid fresh out of high school. And truth be told, I joined them in their resentment. Why? It certainly wasn’t because I had more seniority or was more deserving of the promotion. I was simply imitating the desires of my coworkers. I desired according to the desires of the crowd. Sharing desires helps us fit in with the group, which I wanted to do. But I also internalized their desire to become the assistant manager. I thought that I could do a much better job than that 19 year old – after all, I had just graduated college...with a degree in religious studies! Which is, you know, incredibly practical, especially when giving orders on how to file paperwork.

Soon, I would get my desires fulfilled. The assistant manager went off to college. When he left, the supervisor of the department offered me the position. I took it! After all, this was exactly what I wanted. But I soon realized that my coworkers didn’t like taking orders from a 23 year old, either ... In fact, I lost my place in the group and found myself in the place of the new scapegoat.

Which leads to the second part of mimetic theory – the scapegoat mechanism. Conflict develops when mimetic desires converge on the same object. If we don’t have the tools to manage our conflicts in constructive and healthy ways, then we will manage them in destructive and violent ways. Throughout our history, humans have deflected conflict that threatens our lives and communities by channeling them onto an individual – a scapegoat. The “sins” that threaten our community are cast upon our scapegoat, who is blamed for the group’s problems. The accusations against a scapegoat are also mimetic. As one person, then another, then another point the finger of accusation against an individual, it creates a snowball effect as more people start to mimic the accusation. Soon, all are united against the scapegoat. It becomes a sacred duty to kill or banish the accused. As we successfully unite against our common enemy, peace is restored, but that peace is only temporary because we haven’t dealt with the root of the conflict that stems from mimetic desire. When conflict reemerges, we start the scapegoating cycle over again.

You can see how my colleagues and I scapegoated our assistant manager, whose only “sin” was his age. Our community system was based on having an outsider – a scapegoat whom we could unite against in gossip. Family systems work the same way, including my family system. In the pillow fight example, it is obvious to tell who the scapegoat is in my family system. My daughter blamed my middle child and then my oldest mimicked her accusation by blaming him, too.

We humans have been blaming one another since the beginning. Genesis claims that the first humans were caught up in a cycle of blame after they ate the forbidden fruit. Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed
the serpent. In fact, Adam also blamed God, “The woman, whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree, and I ate.”

My children were simply acting out the drama of scapegoating that humans have been playing from the beginning of history. Scapegoating is the force that unites all against one. And if the one believes in his or her guilt too, the scapegoat mechanism has accomplished its ultimate goal. My middle child, for example, believed that he was the one to blame. After his sister accused him, he took on his familiar role as the guilty scapegoat by agreeing with his siblings that he deserved the blame.

This leads us to the third part of mimetic theory. Girard claims that the Bible reveals that desire is mimetic and that it leads to the violent scapegoating mechanism, but it also reveals the solution to creating community through scapegoating. As I hinted at above, the solution is forgiveness.

The Bible is full of sibling rivalry due to mimetic desire. Jacob and his twin brother Esau are a prime example of sibling rivalry and the biblical hope for transforming sibling rivalry into sibling reconciliation. Even before they were born, they were rivals in their mother’s womb. When Esau emerged from his mother’s womb, Jacob grasped at his brother’s heel, trying to pull him back inside the womb so that Jacob could be the first born.

The Bible shows that Jacob’s desire was clearly mimetic. He wanted what Esau had, especially Esau’s birthright as the first born son. Jacob’s desire for Esau’s birthright was stirred by their mother Rebecca, who “loved Jacob.” Mother and son united against Esau, their scapegoat. Rebecca suggested to Jacob that he deceive this father into giving him Esau’s inheritance.

They created an elaborate ruse to trick the aging and blind Isaac into giving Jacob his brother’s birthright. Jacob disguised himself by putting on Esau’s clothes and wearing sheep skin – because Esau was apparently a hairy dude. Jacob came to Isaac and lied, “I am Esau, your firstborn. I have done as you told me; now sit up … so that you may bless me.” After the act of deception, Isaac blessed Jacob with Esau’s birthright.

Esau became furious and vowed to kill his brother.

And you thought your family had issues!

Esau chased after Isaac, but Isaac found refuge in a faraway land with his uncle Laban. The dysfunctional family soap opera continues with more deception, only this time Laban tricks Jacob into 14 years of servitude. After many years, Jacob realized he could no longer run from his past and he decided to return home with his family. He needed to face his brother Esau. In hopes of creating some pre-emptive reconciliation, Jacob sent messengers to greet Esau with gifts. After meeting with Esau, Jacob’s messenger reported to him that Esau was coming “with four hundred men” to meet Jacob.

Four hundred men. That’s a small army!

Jacob feared that Esau was still seeking revenge for his childhood prank. He prayed that God would, “Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother…for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children.”
But this wasn’t to be a story of revenge and murder. It was a story of divine reconciliation. When Esau saw his brother Jacob, “he ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.”

The sibling rivalry ended. Esau forgave his brother and they found reconciliation.

The Bible always points beyond itself to the divine truth that in the midst of human rivalry and violence born from mimetic desire, God is working in the world to bring love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Jacob speaks to that revelation of divine forgiveness when he says to his brother, “for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.”

Jesus lived by that radical forgiveness during his life, death, and resurrection. He didn’t accept the blame of the crowd that united against him. Rather, he maintained his innocence, but he didn’t do so resentfully. He continued to love his neighbors, including his enemies, as he loved himself. And the way he loved those who turned against him was through the spirit of forgiveness. Jesus not only taught his disciples to forgive, he modeled how to forgive. In fact, Jesus claimed to be the Son of Man who “has authority to on earth to forgive sins” (Mark 2:10). That forgiveness was on full display as Jesus hung on the cross. “Father, forgive them,” Jesus prayed, “for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

In that single statement, Jesus spoke the truth about God and humanity. When we are caught up in the scapegoating mechanism, we literally do not know what we are doing. We think our scapegoats are truly guilty and deserve the violence coming to them. But over time the Bible reveals that no matter how evil we believe our enemies to be, the violence of scapegoating will only lead to a future of apocalyptic destruction.

Jesus revealed that the only alternative to human violence is divine forgiveness. Indeed, when we witness someone forgiving another, we witness the very presence of God in the world. Living by that forgiveness can change family systems and, indeed, the world.

Layout of the Book

As you will see, I’ve structured this ebook into three sections that follow the three main principles of mimetic theory, but the principles have a tendency to merge together. Some chapters could easily have landed in a different section. Also, some of the chapters here are original to this ebook, but others first appeared as articles on the Raven Foundation website. I’m grateful to the Raven readers for their thoughtful engagement with these articles and helping me think them through at a deeper level.

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I’m also thankful to my middle school and high school youth groups. When I tell people that I’m a former youth pastor, they often respond with, “Oh, I’m so sorry.” Truthfully, I have no idea what they’re talking
about. My ten years of youth ministry were amazing. I learned so much about faith, love, and even parenting through my youth groups.

I was fortunate to have amazing parents. My Mother died from a 10 year battle with cancer in 2000. I was 21. Throughout her life and death, she taught me about grace and Jesus. My Dad is the most amazing man I’ve ever met. If I’m half that Dad he is, I’ll consider myself a success.

This e-book is dedicated to my children. Since it’s largely about them, there’s a chance they might read it in a few years. I’d like to take a minute to talk directly to them. Hi. These stories are about you. I hope you don’t mind that I’ve used them ... because it’s kind of too late now ... Anyway, some of my favorite moments in life are here. That roller coaster in our basement was amazing! I wish we still had it. Do you remember that time I turned into Darth Vader? The day you picked George Washington’s nose? Or how about when we lived in Chicago and you thought our 75 year old neighbor was your girlfriend? You have given me the best times of my life. Mimetic theory claims that we are not individuals; we are interindividuals. It basically means that our identity is dependent upon others. My identity as a dad is dependent upon you. It’s the best thing about my life and I’m grateful that you are my children and that your mom is “the Wife.” Listen to her. Trust me. Your life will go better.
Part 1: Mimetic Desire

A few weeks ago I was wrestling with some choices. I felt pressure by some people to make one choice, but I also felt pressure from others to make the other choice. Back and forth I went as people made their suggestions until finally a good friend became exasperated enough with my dilemma that he said, “Geeze, Adam! What do you want?”

I finally concluded that I was wrestling over two really good choices, which allowed me to relax about making the decision. But it brought up an important question about desire – Why do we want the things that we want?

René Girard asked that question and realized the social nature of our desires. He discovered that our desires for things, people, even prestige are learned from others around us. The people we admire and want to be like become our models for desire. Sharing desires with others is a good thing – it’s the way we form friendships and fall in love. But it can also lead to rivalry and violence when we compete for something we can’t or won’t share.

René Girard is not the only person to think about desire in this fashion. Others have noticed the imitative nature of being human and its role in our relationships. Rudolf Steiner, the creator of Waldorff education system, stated that during childhood,

…nothing is accomplished through admonition; commands and prohibitions have no effect at all. But the examples are most significant. What children see, what happens in their surroundings, they feel must be imitated … Exhortations have no effect, but the way a person acts in the child’s presence matters greatly. It is far more important to refrain from doing what the child is not permitted to do than to forbid the child to imitate it.1

Steiner died before mimetic theory was developed by Girard, but his statement is an excellent description of mimetic desire among children. But the same could be said about adults. We desire through imitation. Teaching, what Steiner calls “exhortation,” matters, but the example we provide our children matters much more. Children model their lives after adults. Children are always becoming. And they are learning to become adults. The way they learn to become adults is by imitating the actions of adults.

What does it mean to become an adult in this world? For good and for ill, children look to our example.

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Chapter 1: For the Joy of Parenting: Desire, Penguins, and Roller Coasters

March 15, 2011

This morning it was the penguin.

It could just as easily have been the bear, the dog, the giraffe, or even the man dressed in blue pajamas who is missing his red cape. But this morning it was the hand puppet penguin.

I have two boys, ages four and two. They are adorable little tykes (which they clearly get from their Mother), but sometimes they fight. As children do.

“I want penguin!” shouted our youngest. (Part of what makes him adorable is that he isn’t quite speaking in full sentences yet. That’s cute.)

“I had it first!” retorted his older brother.

Of course, our house is F.A.O. Schwartz on steroids. Toys are everywhere: We have stuffed animals, Hot Wheels, Playmobils, and even a roller coaster in our basement. (Seriously. I ride it frequently.) “Are you kidding me?” I began to wonder. “Why are you fighting over a stupid hand puppet penguin when we have a freakin roller coaster in our basement?”

I tried all the parental tricks I know. Distraction. Reasoning. Sharing. None of it worked. Why?

Here’s the thing: It wasn’t about the penguin. The only reason our younger son wanted the penguin was because our older son had it. His possession of the toy made that toy desirable – more desirable than any other toy. But it was about our older son – his possession of the penguin. So, they got in a power struggle over possessing a penguin. Seems pretty irrational, huh? Especially when you consider that there is a roller coaster in our basement!

It may seem irrational, but it is human. As René Girard wrote in his book Deceit, Desire and the Novel, humans “desire according to Another” (4, italics in original). So, our youngest son was desiring according to the desire of his older brother. This created a cycle that went like this: the more our older son wanted to keep the penguin, the more our younger son wanted the penguin. The more our younger son wanted the penguin, the more our older son wanted to keep the penguin. That cycle of desire is natural, as is the unfortunate conflict that ensues.

It is easy to see how this mechanism works in children, but the truth is that adults fall into the same traps. I’ve heard that married couples sometimes fight like this. But, for me, the most obvious example is in our politics. When we pick a political side of the spectrum, we often fall
into the trap of trying to grasp political power from the other person or party. Politics becomes our “stupid” penguin. But again, it’s not about the penguin; it’s about possessing what the other has. Sure. Ideally, politics is about finding ways to do what’s best for the common good. Unfortunately, we so often use politics as a means to exert our political will over and against another. It becomes a game of winners and losers, of possessing power, as opposed to doing what’s best for a country. Indeed, we have some different ideas about what is best for the country, but our ideas are mired in our shared desire to win the political power game.

So, what’s the solution? When my boys were fighting over the penguin, I asked our older son to look at his brother’s face and tell me what he saw. Well, he ran off crying and I felt like the world’s worst Dad. But, now that I’ve had a few hours to reflect about that, it seems to me he ran off crying because in that moment he empathized with his brother. He moved into his brother’s place. He felt his brother’s humanity. And that’s an intense experience of empathy. When we are able to have that experience with a family member (or a political opponent) to run off crying is an appropriate response.

I’m gonna go ride the roller coaster now.
Chapter 2: What Do You Want?: The Positive Intention Behind Desire

August 19, 2015

We bought our children a Wii for Christmas. That may have been our first mistake...

The Wii is the latest version of the Nintendo gaming system. When I was eight years old, my parents bought us our first Nintendo. It was the original 1987 version. And it was glorious. I’m the youngest of four siblings. My sister, brothers, and I each logged many hours playing Super Mario Brothers, Duck Hunt, the Legend of Zelda, and Final Fantasy.

It was a great childhood.

But my siblings and I had our conflicts. After all, when four children each want to play Nintendo at the same time, there’s bound to be a fight. Unless our parents were home to help manage the conflict, whose turn it was often depended on who was bigger.

My parents came up with a brilliant solution. They bought us another Nintendo.

We’re not at the point of buying another Wii yet, but apparently sibling rivalries over a Nintendo system haven’t changed much since 1987.

My children frequently each fight over whose turn it is and what game they are going to play. It starts as a yelling match that easily escalates into name calling and hitting. After some yelling yesterday about whose turn it was, they settled on a game that all three of them can play at the same time – Super Mario 3D World. Each of them gets to pick between a classic character – Mario, Luigi, the Princess, or Toad. I felt a sense of parental pride because they came up with such a great solution.

Well, in Super Mario 3D World, one character can pick up another and carry that character to safety. Isn’t that sweet? But one character could also pick up another and throw that character over a cliff into a boiling pit of hot lava.

You can tell where this is going ... After my oldest child did that a few times to his younger brother’s character, things got pretty ugly. My middle child started crying and acting violently - he threw his controller to the ground, yelled at his brother to stop, and then threatened to hit him.
At this point, I decided it was time to intervene.

“Hey!” I shouted over the commotion. When I got their attention, I calmly asked my middle child, “What do you want?”

“I want to live!” he exclaimed with tears in his eyes.

My little daddy heart just melted. I realize this is just a video game, but there’s a larger truth behind my son’s statement. Video games are so enthralling because of our mimetic nature. As we play, we begin to identify with our character. We find ourselves absorbed into the fantasy world of the game. My middle child identified and empathized so closely with his character that when his character died in the game, he sensed a death within himself, too.

The same dynamic occurred with my older son. His ability to pick up another character and throw it into a watery grave of lava gave him an addictive sense of power that he hadn’t felt before. That it had the added benefit of frustrating his younger brother made even more appealing for him.

A few months ago I may have responded differently to a child’s meltdown than calmly asking, “What do you want?” I may have asserted my own sense of power by clenching my teeth and demanding, “You kids better stop yelling this instant! Or I’m going to take the Wii away!”

But this time I decided to try a different strategy by asking, “What do you want?” Although it often leads to conflict and rivalry, desire – wanting – is fundamentally good. As René Girard states, “Mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that far from being merely imitative in a small sense, it’s the opening out of oneself” (The Girard Reader, pg 64).

*There is always a positive intention behind our desires*, even when desires lead to conflict. But quite often we never get to express the positive intention. For example, behind my middle child’s frustration and threat of violence against his older brother was the desire to live. Acknowledging his desire allowed him to talk about the good intention behind his violent behavior. And talking about his desire enabled him to calm down so that he didn’t act out his frustration against his brother.

Once we discovered what he wanted, I looked at his older brother and simply stated, “Your brother would like to live. Could you stop throwing him over the cliff?”

“Okay,” he shrugged. He stopped and their Wii experience was much more pleasant.

Of course, I could have also become angry at my son who was throwing his brother off the cliff. I didn’t ask him what he wanted, but I can imagine some responses. Maybe he wanted a sense of power. He could have been in a power struggle with his brother, and the sense of power that came with throwing his brother into the lava gave him a sense of control.

I often sense that I’m in a power struggle with my children. There’s frequent resistance when it’s time to get dressed, or brush their teeth, or go to bed, or have dinner. It’s easy to get
trapped in this pattern of rivalry with our children. After all, I’m the dad. I should be in control! My children should bow down to my demands! I shouldn’t have to ask twice...

When I act like that, it’s like I’m throwing them into the lava. And of course they are going to respond with tantrums. I don’t like it when people boss me around. Why would a child like it?

In fact, just like children absorb the world of video games, they absorb the world of adult. When we try to control their lives by demanding certain things, they begin to learn that they can get what they want by demanding certain things.

They way out of this parenting trap is not to aggressively continue in our demands until our children succumb to our every whim. Rather, the solution is to discover our child’s positive intent and align ourselves with it. My youngest son wanted to live. Of course he did! That’s what we all want. If my suspicion was right, my oldest child desired a sense of power. What might have been the positive intent behind his desire for power? It might have given him a sense of safety, or of being worthwhile, or some sense of purpose in the world.

Those are positive intentions. They are good. The problem is that the methods used to achieve those positive intentions are often filled with destructive rivalry, especially among siblings. But once we find the positive intent, we are enabled to find alternative methods to achieving our desires.
Chapter 3: More than Meets the Eye: Transformers and Desire

March 31, 2011

It started a few months ago. Our eldest son came home from daycare saying some very strange words. That little four year old came home saying words like Optimus Prime, Megatron, and Bumblebee. (Okay, that last one isn’t so strange.) My wife and I were left to wonder, “Where did he learn to say those words?”

Of course, daycare was to blame, or praise.

Our son’s best friend loves Transformers. He brings his Transformers to school where he and our son play with them – a lot. In fact, Transformers are now their favorite toys.

(Who, btw, was the genius who thought of Transformers? And how did he make that sales pitch? “C’mon guys! Trucks and cars that change into robots coming to earth from outer space to fight an epic battle! It’ll work!!!)

I later asked his dad about Transformers. He very proudly told me that he saved all of his Transformers from his childhood and that he is now passing them along to his sons.

Well, his son passed along the joy of Transformers to my son.

And that’s how human desire works. We borrow desires from one another. My son had never even heard of Transformers before his buddy brought them to school. And now he loves them.

So, we bought our son a green Transformer for Christmas. Why a green one? It was cheap. We went on a family vacation last weekend and bought him Optimus Prime. He loves it. Of course, on the drive home every two minutes he asked me to change it back into a truck. Ugh.

This morning, though, my son had a bit of what my wife likes to call a “meltdown.” It
started with our son asking his mother if they could go to the store and buy *Bumblebee*. “No” was the response.

Uh-oh.

After that, my wife had to get ready for work. So, I was left to deal with a screaming child. I tried to be rational. “Why are you upset?” I asked. “Mommy said no!” He responded. “Well, you can’t always get what you want.” (I love that song, and invoke it frequently, but, unfortunately, this time it didn’t work. Actually, it never works…) “NOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” And he went off screaming and crying.

Parenting FAIL.

Well, as he became increasingly emotional, so did I. I became frustrated. I needed to get him and his brother dressed, but it was impossible. I couldn’t control his wiggly body. He didn’t want to get dressed, so he pushed me away, which only frustrated me more. I took a deep breath and walked away.

Because, there’s no winning a power struggle with a four-year old.

As I look back upon the incident, I realize that the same principle of desire for things also works with emotions. We borrow desires from one another, but we also borrow emotions from one another. I borrowed my son’s frustration and our mutual frustration escalated. We were trapped.

He pushed me away, and was completely right to do so. We both needed some alone time.

Fortunately, my wife soon came to the rescue. She calmed us both down. Her presence was soothing. She told our son that if he saved up his money, he could soon buy Bumblebee. That was enough to calm him down. She told me I did the right thing by walking away.

My son and I are lucky because my wife is good at creating alternatives. We got trapped in an escalating situation and needed to be shown another way. She was able to *transform* (I couldn’t resist) the situation by modeling a calming presence, which was a presence my son and I could both borrow.

Yeah. That’s good parenting. That’s my wife.
I consider myself to be a good dad.

And that’s where the problem began.

One of the main reasons that I consider myself to be a good dad is that I buy my children really cool toys ... that I get to play with...

Well, a few years ago I bought them a toy rocket with a launch pad. When I... err... I mean they ... stomp on the pad the rocket launches 50 feet in the air! My status as a “good dad” increased last year when I bought my oldest son a set of Loom Bands. He loves making bracelets and necklaces with the little rubber bands. And, last April, when we moved to a new neighborhood halfway across the country, my status flew off the “good dad chart” when I bought him a brand new bike!

So, you see, my children have really cool toys. And that makes me a really good dad.

But then we met our neighbors.

A few days after we moved into our new house, my son took his rocket launcher outside. As he started sending it into the air, a neighbor boy came over to play. “Hey!” the boy said. “I have a rocket launcher that goes even higher!” He ran back to his house and brought his super-duper deluxe rocket launcher that he stomped 75 feet in the air!
My son was very impressed with that rocket launcher. Me? Not so much. I began to feel a sense of inferiority. The thought crossed my mind, “His dad bought him a better rocket launcher! Maybe I’m not such a good dad after all.”

When we went outside the next day, the neighbor boy came over again. “Hey!” he exclaimed as he looked at my son’s Loom Band bracelet. “You make Loom Bands too! I’ll show you some of the things I’ve made!” He ran home and came back with a frog, turtle, horse, and a freakin’ dragon made of Loom Bands. As my son looked in awe upon our neighbor’s Loom creations, the thought crossed my mind, “His dad not only bought him Loom Bands but also encouraged him to make a freakin’ dragon with them! I’ve only encouraged my son to make these sorry looking bracelets!”

And then it happened. I bought my son a new bicycle. He was riding it with pride when (deep breath) the neighbor boy came out of his garage driving his new Power Wheels!!! My son instantly ditched his bike and ran toward our neighbor’s “new car.” I stewed there in my resentment as my dad ego deflated and I thought to myself, “You gotta be kidding me! That dad has an answer for every toy I buy. What a jerk!”

I share this with you not just because of my masochistic tendency to share my failures in parenting. I also share it with you as an example of mimetic desire at work in my life. Mimetic theory’s basic claim is that human desire is imitative. We “desire according to the desire of another.”

In other words, we want what others have. We have an innate desire to “keep up with the Jonses.” Do you remember the 10th Commandment? To paraphrase, “Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor’s stuff.” The 10th Commandment warns us against desiring our neighbor’s stuff because when we desire this way it leads resentment, envy, and often to violent conflict.

But even more than wanting our neighbor’s stuff, we want our neighbor’s identity. Sounds kind of creepy, right? Well, it happens to us all and you can see how it happened to me. I want to be a good dad and one of the ways that I know I’m a good dad is that my children have cool toys. But what happens when another dad buys his child cooler toys than I buy my children? I start comparing myself with him. I start thinking that I’m not enough. I become resentful. In my own head I compete with my neighbor in a rivalry for the coveted prize, “Dad of the Year.”

Comparing ourselves with others is a fundamental aspect of human mimeticism. We are always comparing ourselves with others. As a blogger, I compare my stats with other bloggers. Businesses are always comparing their bottom line with other businesses. Politicians compare
themselves by how many votes they get. Nations compare themselves by their military might. And, yes, dads compare their fatherly prowess by the toys they buy their children.

It sounds silly and ridiculous, I know, but it’s also human. Now that I look back on my silly mimetic behavior that led me to compare myself with my neighbor, I can gently laugh at myself. I can remind myself as I navigate the traps of mimetic desire of what I already know deep down – being a good dad is not about buying cool toys for my children. Being a good dad is about having children who know they are unconditionally loved.

Being a good dad also means modeling not just the refusal to desire our neighbor’s stuff, but also the desire to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

And so I walked over to my new neighbor, shook his hand, and said, “That is such a cool Power Wheel. Thanks for letting my children play with it, too.”

“You’re welcome,” the dad responded. “Our previous neighbor got one for his children. So I thought I’d get one, too.”

It’s silly, isn’t it? But that is mimetic desire at work.
Chapter 5: Paddle Boards, Mimetic Desire, and Balancing Faith

September 02, 2014

My family recently went on a vacation to Coeur D’Alene, Idaho. Coeur D’Alene is a city in northern Idaho that is not only impossible to spell, but it nestles against an impossibly beautiful lake where my aunt and uncle own a gorgeous home.

I had a great time playing in the water with my three children. We swam, rode a paddle boat, and played in the sand. All safe and fun activities that were perfect for my 7, 6, and 4 year old children.

But then my aunt did the unthinkable! As I was a hundred feet away relaxing on her dock, she hoisted my seven year old on her paddle board!

“No!” I thought to myself. “He’s not ready! He’s too young!”

I’d never been on a paddle board before. I’d only seen others stand on the surfboard-like structure as they paddle across a lake or river. When I lived in Chicago, I’d see people standing on them paddling on Lake Michigan. Some friends with experience paddle boarding told me that it takes a tremendous amount of balance and skill to stay afloat on a paddle board. And, well, I’m a klutz. So I assume my offspring are klutzes.

Hence, my fear.

I resisted the temptation to scold my aunt for her reckless behavior with my children, and it’s a good thing I did. They loved the paddle board! Apparently, the Ericksen klutz gene skips a generation. They each stood securely on the board and paddled with perfect rhythm to the lake’s beating waves.

Mimetic Desire, Un-Learning fear, and Learning Joy

Mimetic theory claims that we learn desire through imitation of our models. This seems obvious enough. It’s easy to see how my aunt taught my children how get on the paddle board, balance on it, and paddle their way on the lake. But they learned something much more important from my aunt about paddle boarding than the technique – they learned it was something to enjoy.
Now, if I had given into my trepidation and yelled from across the dock, I would have taught my children that paddle boarding wasn’t something to enjoy; rather, it was something to fear.

But my aunt taught them that paddle boards were something to enjoy.

Parents spend much of our time fearing for our children. We worry that they aren’t ready yet and that they’ll get hurt. Not only do we hold them back, but we inadvertently teach them that they should live in fear.

In fact, parents have a tendency to project our own fears and anxieties upon our children. Children learn how to fear the world and be anxious from us. But they can also learn how to enjoy the world from us, too.

**Mimetic Theory and Faith**

This is where faith comes in. Faith is not forcing our intellect to believe certain doctrines. Rather, faith is the ability to trust in someone else. For example, my aunt had faith that my children could ride the paddle board. My children absorbed her faith in them, and thus had faith in themselves that they could not only do it, but enjoy it.

When it comes to the faith of Jesus, Christians tend to emphasize his faith in the Father. Jesus trusted that the Father was pure, unadulterated, nonviolent, self-giving love. As their model, Jesus’ disciples learned from him that they had nothing to fear from God because God is perfect love and “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

The fact that we don’t have to fear God because of Jesus’ faith in God’s nonviolent love is important and life changing. But we tend to miss another aspect of Jesus’ faith that is just as important and life changing:

Jesus has faith in us.

Jesus’ faith in us is audacious and astonishing – some might even call his faith in us heretical. After all, Jesus said that his followers “will also do the works that I do and, in fact, do greater works than these, because I am going to the father” (John 14:12).

We will do greater works than Jesus? I must admit, I don’t know exactly what to make of that statement. To say that Jesus’ disciples will do greater works than saving the world from sin and death sound at least borderline heretical. But my experience with my aunt and my children gave me an important insight into that text.

Jesus’ faith that we would “do greater works than these” opens his disciples to a non-anxious, non-rivalrous, and non-fearful relationship with him. Even the best of teachers can fall into a rivalry with their students. There comes a point where a student becomes better than a
teacher. The teacher, living in fear of being upstaged by the student, attempts to hold the
student back with phrases like, “You aren’t ready! You are too young!”

But Jesus had no fear. His faith was in the Father, whose perfect love drives out fear and rivalry.
He also had faith in us, we who frequently get faith and life and love wrong. And yet, there is
Jesus, putting us back on the paddle board when we fall, constantly teaching us to unlearn fear
and rivalry and to learn to have faith in him who has faith in us.
Chapter 6: How a Child Redeemed the Sins of His Father

April 30, 2014

It happened to me again on Sunday morning. We just moved to Oregon last week and were about to try a new church. Our morning routine is pretty typical: we tell our children it’s time to get dressed. Our first and third child diligently put on their clothes, while our middle child finds a thousand and one ways to distract himself. Driving. Me. Crazy.

Intellectually, I could sympathize with him. I remembered that I hate it when people tell me what to do and when I need to do it. But when it comes to getting out the door on Sunday mornings, I’m run much more by emotions than by intellectual sympathy. And this Sunday morning I was on edge. (I know, very Christianly of me...) After asking nicely a few times, I soon started raising my voice at him, demanding that he get dressed! Of course, the more I demanded that he get dressed the more he insisted on not getting dressed. At this point, I was hooked in a rivalry with a five year old.

Again, intellectually I know that this is the point where I need to step away, but my emotions held sway. For a parent, this is the time when that voice starts up in our heads: Who’s the parent here? You can’t lose to a five year old! You must show him who’s boss or he will run you over! Don’t give an inch or he will take a mile!

Fortunately, my wife saved the morning when she came to the room and calmly asked him to get dressed, which he did immediately. Her success only infuriated me more, so I stormed out of the room like the mature 35 year old that I am...

Mimetic Desire

It may seem counter-intuitive, but my son’s response to me was mimetic, or imitative. We were imitating each other’s desire. “But wait!” You may be thinking. “Your son didn’t want to get dressed and you wanted him to get dressed. You wanted different things. How could that be imitation of desire?”
On the surface, it looks like we had different desires: to get dressed and to not get dressed. But if you dig a bit deeper below the surface, we were run by the exact same desire – the desire to be in control. The more I desired to exert control over my son, the more he imitated my desire to be in control.

Of course, my desire isn’t really mine and his desire isn’t really his. The desire that possesses parents to be in control of their children is itself mimetic. It stems from the cultural messages I referred to earlier that state: Who’s the parent here? You can’t lose to a five year old! You must show him who’s boss or he will run you over! Don’t give an inch or he will take a mile!

**The Sins of the Parents**

In the book of Exodus, God speaks through Moses and provides Israel with the 10 Commandments. The second commandment has the statement that “I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me” (20:5). As I’ve stated in a previous chapter, I’ve never liked that passage – there are so many things wrong with it theologically. God’s “jealousy” aside, God is just, and since God is just God can’t punish children for sins their parents make. God doesn’t scapegoat children because of their parents. But if you want to understand Exodus literally because you understand the Bible literally, you will have to take it up with the prophet Ezekiel who explicitly contradicts Exodus by saying, “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own” (18:20)

Theologically, the statement from Exodus is problematic, but anthropologically, it rings true. Whenever I get caught in a mimetic rivalry with my children I am creating them in my fallen image. I create a pattern of desire in them that is prone to rivalry for control. That is the sin of the parent and parents pass that sin on from generation to generation.

**The Good News of Forgiveness and the Redemption of a Father**

The good news for us parents is that Ezekiel was right. God isn’t in the background punishing our children for our sins, causing generation after generation to fall into this pattern. God doesn’t punish us; we punish ourselves. And since God doesn’t punish us, there is hope for transformation.

Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Now, children can be snot nosed little brats. Of course, we adults can be snot nosed big brats and snot nosed big brats are much more dangerous than snot nosed little brats, but that misses the point.

One of the many things I appreciate about my son is that he is quick to forgive. While I stew over our mimetic rivalry for control and then experience guilt and shame for getting in a rivalry with a five year old, he has already forgiven me and moved on. At age five, he doesn’t hold my
sins against me. And that, I think, is what Jesus meant when he said to become like little children. Children don’t hold our sins against us. And neither does God. As St. Paul stated in 2 Corinthians 5:19,

   In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently connects the kingdom of heaven to the act of forgiveness. So, when he said, “unless you become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” it’s not a stretch to state he was suggesting to mimic a child’s natural ability to forgive and live into reconciliation.

The sins of the parents might mimetically extend from one generation to the next, but the forgiveness of child can stop that mimetic cycle. Further, the forgiveness of a child can redeem his sinful parent.

And this parent is thankful for that.

*My colleague Suzanne Ross has a great essay on this passage called Beyond Power Struggles: Teaching Without Rivalry.*
Chapter 7: The Day My Boys Picked George Washington’s Nose

April 16, 2014

Mount Rushmore is very cool. I mean, the capacity to bomb, dynamite, and chisel human faces that are so life-like out of a massive piece of rock is very impressive.

Even more impressive are the pictures below.

Let’s face it. Children, especially boys, can be so immature. I have no idea where my boys get it from. But it might have something to do with mimetic theory...

How I convinced my wife to take these amazing pictures – that we will probably never know.
Chapter 8: Why the Elf on the Shelf Can Stay

December 19, 2013

It’s taken me a few years, but I’ve decided to relax about him. I refuse to beat myself up over his presence anymore. He’s okay. I mean, don’t get me wrong – he’s annoying and I have concerns. And I know that many of my fellow parents will disagree, and that’s okay. This makes me cringe, but that little Elf on the Shelf can stay.

After some debate, my wife bought the Elf on the Shelf in 2010. If you aren’t familiar with the Elf on the Shelf myth, it goes something like this: Apparently Santa is incapable of knowing if children have been bad or good on his own, so from December 1st to December 24th that Jolly Old Elf sends his little elves to houses to spy on boys and girls. Their job is to check to see if children are being naughty or nice. So, each morning before anyone is awake, our Elf flies in from the North Pole and hides in a different spot in our house. When our children wake up – noticeably earlier in December than any other month – they look for him. Yup, it’s hide and seek every morning with the Elf. Then, the NSA Elf spies on our children throughout the day. When our children fall asleep at night, the Elf flies back to the North Pole to provide Santa with a report on how our children have behaved. Then the Elf promptly flies back to our house, hides in a new place, and the morning hide and seek ritual begins again.

Truth be told, my children love it. I mean they Love. It. They can’t wait to wake up in the morning and search for that little Elf.

“Daddy! Daddy! We found the Elf! Do you want us to show you where he’s hiding?” they ask me as I begin to wake up.

“No” I think to myself. “It’s 6:00! I don’t care about that damn Elf. Let me sleep.”

“C’mon, Dad!” They yell as they tug on my shirt. “We’ll show you where he is!”
Everyone in my family loves the Elf on the Shelf, so maybe I’m just being a curmudgeon. “Bah humbug to that little Elf,” I used to think. “Quit messing with my sleep.” But, alas, my wife keeps the Elf tradition alive in our house. She brings him out of his 11 month hibernation and she hides him every night from December 1st to the 24th. Well, she forgot one night, but fortunately she woke up at 3 a.m. all worried about something…then she remembered about our little Elf, got out of bed, and flung him on top of our refrigerator.

So, why do I feel some parental guilt about the Elf on the Shelf? While some claim that the Elf encourages good behavior, it feels to me like this whole Santa/Elf myth manipulates good behavior. It says, “You must be good or no presents this Christmas! You better be good…The Elf is watching…The Elf is always watching…”

Yep. It’s a little creepy.

I worry that this manipulation of good behavior teaches children to grasp onto goodness. This is a problem because humans are social creatures and because we are social, when we grasp onto goodness, we tend to grasp goodness away from others. How do we know that we are good? By being better than someone else, which means we have to put someone else down. And that’s where blaming comes in. How many times have parents heard this scenario:

_Daaaaad! Billy just hit me!_

_No fair! Johnny punched me first!_

It’s counter-intuitive, but being “good” is one of our biggest problems. Theologian James Alison puts it like this in his book _Jesus the Forgiving Victim_, “[O]ur self-identity as ‘good’ is one of our most sacred idols. It is one of the things that makes us most dangerous to others and to ourselves.”

Our sense of goodness is dangerous to ourselves and to others because we constantly grasp onto goodness over and against one another. The fact is, this is not good because it puts us in a position of rivalry with one another as we grasp onto goodness.
“Goodness” is such a dilemma. Even as I write this I’m aware that I’m putting myself in a position of goodness and moral superiority over those who have no problem with Santa or the Elf on the Shelf. CAN’T YOU SEE WHAT THIS MORALISM OF GOODNESS AND REWARDS IS DOING TO OUR CHILDREN!?! STOP!!!!!

Listen, parenting is hard. I’ve made many mistakes and have many regrets. Is the Elf on the Shelf going to do permanent damage to any child? Of course not. So, despite my reservations that he’s bringing a pernicious moralism into the Ericksen household, he can stay. After all, wouldn’t it be moralistic of me to change his name from the Elf on the Shelf to the Elf in the Garbage Can?

I’m even beginning to admit that the Elf brings a sense of joy and wonder to my children. That joy and wonder is an important part of the Christmas season, which is ultimately about love.

Christmas tells us that as social creatures, we don’t have to grasp onto goodness over and against one another. We can be social creatures who freely love. The freedom to love in a way that isn’t based on others being naughty or nice is especially important when it comes to parenting. As parenting and educational expert Alfie Kohn says in his book Unconditional Parenting, “What kids really need is love without strings attached.” That, I think, is the whole point of Christmas.

Christmas is not about being good enough to receive gifts. It’s about God entering into the world to show us that whether we are “naughty” or “nice” is not the point. The point is that we are loved. And that is a joyful and wondrous thing.

For more Santa, see Suzanne Ross’s article God and Santa: A Story for Pre-Schoolers.
Part 2: Rivalry and Scapegoating

As our desires converge on the same object, be it a toy or a love interest, conflict and rivalry are bound to follow. We often think that conflict stems from our differences, but mimetic theory teaches us that conflict is actually the result of our similarities. It is because we desire the same thing as another that we fall into conflict and rivalry.

Due to our mimetic nature, conflict and rivalry are inevitable, especially with those we are closest to. That’s why family dynamics can become dysfunctional. The closer we are to certain people, the more chances we have for conflict.

But the inevitability of rivalry doesn’t have to lead to scapegoating another. As long as we can keep the object in view, it is possible to keep a conflict from becoming a violent scapegoating incident. In the following stories, I explore more about desire and rivalry. Sometimes we were able to find a peaceful solution. It’s difficult to admit, but at other times I succumbed to certain forms of scapegoating, like the day I became Darth Vader. It’s one of the basic parenting traps. Fortunately, there is a way out of the trap. But before we talk too much about the solution, we need to know more about the danger. So, here we go, Part 2: Rivalry and Scapegoating...
Chapter 9: Parenting FAIL: Power Struggles and Empathy

January 07, 2012

My wife had to leave early this morning for a business trip. She was out the door by 7:15 with hugs, kisses, and goodbyes. Then the door shut. I walked to the kitchen and peered through the window as she slowly backed our mini-van out of our driveway. Our eyes met and we waved. She then drove off. I took a sip of coffee and a deep breath to prepare myself for my morning’s fate.

My wife is my model for good parenting. She gets how it all works. I can be pretty dense, but usually after three or four, okay, usually ten times of observing her amazing parenting skills, they begin to sink in. For example, I’ve learned from observing her that transitions are often easier if our boys know what to expect. They’re not so good with surprises. (Frankly, neither am I. I get frustrated whenever someone disturbs my plans with something unexpected. Like that time when my car got in that accident and obstructed my evening plans. But that’s another story.) “Okay, boys,” she’ll say as we’re driving in the car. “We’re going to the store, then to the children’s museum, then home for lunch, and then we’re going to take naps.”

I love naps.

So I decided to give it a try. My boys were watching “Mickey Mouse Funhouse” in our basement. I walked down to the basement and I gave the boys our morning game plan: “Okay Fellas. Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to shower. Then I’m going to get dressed. Then I’ll help you get dressed. Then I’m going to brush my teeth. Then we’ll put on shoes and jackets, and then we’re going to school. Got it?”

Okay. This strategy works really well, unless you completely FAIL, which I did. There is such a thing as was too much detail for children ages 5 and 3. My 5 year old looked me in the eyes and nodded. My 3 year old gazed off into distant space, but he also nodded. He usually lives in his own 3 year old world, so I decided his nod was good enough confirmation. I went upstairs, leaving them with their temporary babysitters, Mickey and Minnie Mouse.

I did everything in order, careful not to make any surprises. Quick shower, got dressed, got them dressed, brushed my teeth, and then told them it was time to go to the living room to put on our shoes and jackets. My oldest went without a hitch, but my younger son apparently wanted to stay in his younger son world with Mickey and Minnie.
“NO!” he yelled.

I thought to myself, “Ahh, man. Where’s my wife?” But I stayed calm and remembered another one of her tricks. She acknowledges their emotions. It works. When children (and adults) are able to name their emotions, it gives them a sense of empowerment with them. You can’t manage emotions that you haven’t named. In addition, most of us like to have our emotions acknowledged by others. It gives us a sense self-worth and builds a sense of empathy. Having someone compassionately acknowledge our frustrations usually helps calm us down.

“Okay. I see you are sad. Are you sad?”

“NO!” he yelled

Wait! Why wasn’t this working? It always works when my wife does it. So, I tried again. “Oh. Are you mad?”

“NO!”

“Well,” I replied. “It’s time to go to school and I’m going to be late for work if we don’t start leaving. I see that you don’t want to go. I acknowledge that. But we need to go.”

He continued to refuse, so I decided to give him options. (Another trick I learned from my wife. Options allow children feel like they have some power in a situation. Giving options to children [and to adults] can diffuse a power struggle. Unless you’re already knee-deep in one. Then you’re pretty much screwed, as I was here.) “We need to go. Are you going to walk upstairs and put your shoes and jacket on, or do I need to carry you?”

“NO!”

He screamed and kicked as I carried him up the stairs, through our kitchen, and into our living room. I put him down to help my older son with his shoes. As I sat there tying the laces, the younger boy suddenly got a burst of playful energy and decided he wanted to play tag, so he ran behind the coffee table.

“You can’t catch me. You can’t catch me.”
I was getting very frustrated at this point! “Son,” I said as calmly as I could as I clenched my teeth. “I need to put your shoes on you.” Remembering that options are good, I said, “Would you like your ‘fast shoes’ or your ‘slow shoes’?”

“NO!” (Didn’t see that one coming, did you?)

“Okay,” I responded. “If you don’t pick, I’ll pick for you.”

“NO!”

I picked the “slow shoes” because they don’t have laces, but he continued to run around the table. After a bit of chasing, I caught him. There was no use putting his shoes on him, he would just kick them off. I was getting late for work, so I picked him up and carried him to the car. As he kicked and screamed, I opened the door, put him in his car seat, and buckled him in.

I backed out of our driveway and he began to scream, “I WANT MY FAST SHOES!!!!!!”

Of course he wanted his fast shoes...

I stopped the car, looked back at him, and acknowledged his emotions, “Are you sad that you don’t have your fast shoes?”

“YES!!!!”

“Okay. I gave you the options of wearing your fast shoes or your slow shoes. I told you that if you didn’t pick, I’d pick for you. You didn’t pick, so I picked your slow shoes.”

Whimper. It was a whimper. Not a yell. A whimper isn’t good, but it’s better than an ear piercing “NO!”

“Son,” I said. “I see that you’re sad. But next time you can pick your fast shoes. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“NICE!!!!” I said to myself.

He was pretty quiet as we continued on to school. He whimpered a few more times. Each time I replied, “I’m sorry you’re sad, son.” Soon we arrived in the school parking lot. As my older boy hopped out his door and as I unbuckled my younger son, I took him in my arms to set him on the pavement. He completely forgot that he was sad. He moved on to another emotion – excitement. I followed them as they raced into school, then gave them hugs and kisses. I smiled as I realized that I failed. That I didn’t control my children with my various strategies. I didn’t
avoid the power struggle. I failed – and that’s okay. Failure is part of the long journey of “Parenting.”

We can’t always avoid a power struggle. But it’s possible to stay composed and go through them with our children. It looks like my son and I wanted different things. It looks like he wanted to stay home while I wanted to get them to school. But in reality, we wanted the same thing. We both wanted control of the situation, which is why we fell into a mimetic rivalry.

Trying to “win” only escalates the frustrations of the rivalry. A parent’s ability to stay calm through power struggles is the only possible way of diffusing the situation. And, by staying calm, we begin to model and teach our child how to remain composed during their power struggles and conflicts with others.

Parenting is a difficult path that is full of failure. It’s hard to stay calm. But on this journey, remember that failure is okay, indeed, it’s inevitable, and then seek to forgive yourself. For failure is part of the journey.
A fascinating thing happened as I drove my children home last night.

My 5 year old teased my 4 year old.

Okay. I’ll admit that’s not fascinating. Children tease each other all the time. But I swear something fascinating did happen. And the story starts like this:

As we entered our driveway, my children noticed “Ba-Ba” pulling weeds from her yard. “Ba-Ba” is what they affectionately call our 73 year old neighbor. “Ba-Ba” claims that “Ba-Ba” means Grandma in Polish. She would know. Because, well, she’s Polish.

Anyway, as we drove into our driveway, my four year old yelled “Ba-Ba! I looooooove Ba-Ba!!”

To which my five year old responded with mocking enthusiasm, “You love Ba-Ba!? Haha! Ba-Ba is your girlfriend! Why don’t you go kiss her!? HAHAAAA!!!!!”

Before I could turn my head and yell … err … sorry … raise-my-voice-because-I-am-a-good-dad-who-never-yells-at-his-children … at my older son to quit teasing his brother, my four year old exclaimed,

“I do love Ba-Ba! And Ba-Ba is my girlfriend! Woo-Hoo!!!”

That response was fascinating. It’s in my all-time top five parenting experiences. In that moment he taught me something about being human and our sense of self-worth. You see, at Raven we talk about mimetic theory a lot. Mimetic theory basically states that we receive our sense of self-worth through the eyes of others. In other words, we absorb or imitate someone else’s idea of who we are.

For my boys, it works like this: my four year old loves his brother and so desires his brother’s approval. That’s why when his brother teases him, he usually absorbs it and feels a lack of his own self-worth. His sense of his self-worth is diminished and he gets frustrated. He usually responds defensively and enters into a sibling rivalry. He either teases his brother back, or cries, or complains to his parents.
The same dynamic happens with adults. We want the approval of the people we love, just like children do. And when we don’t get that approval, or when we get negativity instead, we are hurt and usually respond like my 4 year old boy. (Or, does a 4 year old boy respond like an adult?) We find ourselves in rivalry for approval with people we love or respect. But that truth about rivalry is often missed. We don’t enter into rivalry with people because we hate them. Rather, hiding behind every rivalry is admiration and a desire for the other’s approval.

Don’t believe me? Spend any given evening with a married couple. (Not that I would know about that from personal experience or anything. I’ve been married going on 10 years and have only heard that this dynamic can happen among married couples.)

But here’s the thing: in that moment, my son wasn’t drawing his sense of self-worth from his brother. He was drawing it from his Ba-Ba.

We will always receive a sense of our self-worth from the approval of others. It’s part of what makes us social beings. But the question is always this: “Whose approval are we seeking?” At that moment, my four year old’s love for his “Ba-Ba” supplied him with all the love and approval he needed. Although my older son was teasing his brother, the essence of what he said about his brother as he was teaching him was true. The truth about my four year old’s love for his Ba-Ba was all that he cared about.

And so after I parked the car in our garage, my younger son literally ran to Ba-Ba’s front yard. When he found her, he had a huge smile on his face. He quickly embraced his Ba-Ba and said with all the love and approval a little 4 year old boy can muster, “Ba-Ba! You are my girlfriend!!!” And then kissed her on the cheek. She responded with her own loving approval for him by responding “Oh! I’m so happy that I’m your girlfriend!”

There they were. My 4 year old and his 73 year old Ba-Ba. An odd couple indeed. Yet they were both so happy as they basked in the love and approval they have for one another.

It made their day. And it made mine, too.
Chapter 11: How to Parent (And Shop) Like a Boss

May 15, 2014

I’m keenly aware that I am influenced by our cultural expectations for parents.

I’m also keenly aware that a lot of those expectations are total crap.

For example, there’s a cultural message that parents are supposed to be in control of their children. That, in order for them to be “good” children, they are supposed to follow our commands. Parents are the boss and we should assert our authority! Children should do things the first time we ask them, they should never pout or fuss, and they should like it!

Well, that’s crap.

I mean, you can go ahead and try to parent that way. I’ve tried it. The technique utterly fails. It fosters power struggles because children don’t imitate our commands – they imitate desire and emotions behind the command. So, when children perceive that we are trying to be the boss, they will imitate the desire to be the boss. You’ve heard it before:

Child: “You aren’t the boss of me!”
Parent: “Oh yes I am!”
Child: “No you aren’t!”
Parent: “Go to your room!”

The parent may “win” the power struggle by sending the child to his or her room, but the parent has lost the war because the only thing the child has learned is that the way to get what we want is through power – through being the boss.

Overcoming Power Struggles While Shopping at Costco

I just don’t care about cultural expectations for parents any more. My apathy towards those expectations are clearly on display when I’m shopping – especially at Costco. My kids what to dress up as a princess and a pirate? Sure. Heck, maybe next time I’ll wear a pirate princess costume. Sounds like fun.
Most people think dressing up while shopping is cute – and at least others give me a pass. Where I fall into some trouble is when my children decide they want to wander a bit from my cart. I make sure that I can see them, but I no longer care if they walk away from the cart. It’s a power struggle that I don’t want to have any more. Besides, I can empathize with my children. I hate being told where I can walk and how I’m supposed to walk. They are at the stage in their lives where they are learning how to manage their bodies in relationship to other bodies. They might make mistakes and that’s okay with me. If they want to walk up and down Costco aisles, go for it.

Apparently, not everyone agrees with my newly found laissez-faire parenting style. I’ve gotten judgmental looks from other shoppers. Those looks trigger something inside of me. It’s that part that says, “Adam, you are a pathetic parent! If you were a good dad, you wouldn’t be getting these stares from people. You would have your children lined up single file as you shop. They would always say “please” and “thank you,” and they would say, “Oh, I apologize. I did not mean to walk in front of your cart while you were shopping.”

I’ve learned to interpret those looks, and the voice in my head, in a different way. While they seem judgmental, there is also a positive intent behind them. At their best, those “judgmental” looks and the voice in my head want my children to be safe. Of course, I want that too. But I also don’t want to confine my children to the unrealistic expectations of adults.

And I want my children to learn how to manage themselves in social situations. As they grow older, they will make mistakes. They will get in the way of other shoppers. Heck, sometimes I get distracted and block the way for shoppers. Then there are those shoppers who seem totally oblivious to anyone else. They stand in the middle of the aisle and are like,

“Hey! I haven’t seen you in forever!!! How’ve you been?”

“Great! I just got a new job! How are you!”

“Good! Did you hear about Jane...”

What do you do as a shopper? We could spend our energy in judgmental frustration at them. Or, we could simply make a slight left turn and walk past the old friends who are getting reacquainted.

So, I’m no longer going to be a bossy parent while we shopping at Costco. My children can run up and down the aisles. As long as they are safe and only risk coming out of Costco with minor cuts and bruises, I’m gonna count that as a parenting win.
Chapter 12: God, Rivalry, and College Football

October 22, 2014

My family recently moved to Eugene, Oregon. Eugene is probably best known for the University of Oregon Ducks football team. Having moved from Chicago, I know that the Ducks are loved throughout the country for their high powered offense and flamboyant football jerseys. Here in Eugene people are obsessed with the Quack Attack. Nearly every car has a University of Oregon bumper sticker, almost everyone wears a green UofO jacket, and the entire city fell into a state of mourning when the Ducks lost to the Arizona Wildcats and plummeted in the national rankings. There can be no doubt that the people of Eugene love their University of Oregon Ducks.

But as for me and my household, we will love the Oregon State Beavers. (That’s a direct quote from the book of Ericksen 12:15.)

I’m a native Oregonian and I’ve always loved the Beavers. My grandpa went to Oregon State, my mother went to Oregon State, and my brother went to Oregon State. I learned to love the Beavers from my family. I must confess that when it comes to college football rivalries, I’m teaching my children well. For his first day of school this year, my oldest son drew a line in the sand with his Duck loving classmates as he proudly wore his Beavers football jersey.

The rivalry between the Ducks and the Beavers is insane. In fact, it’s so intense that the annual game that pits the teams against each other is called the CIVIL WAR!

Apparently the most effective way to describe the rivalry between the Beavers and the Ducks is to refer to the most fatal battle ever on American soil.

But my son is right. To be a Beavers fan means that you must draw a line in the sand. Not only must you root for the Beavers, you must root against the Ducks! Of course, there are those lukewarm Beaver fans who want to straddle the line. They root for the Ducks as a sign of loyalty to Oregon, hoping that one team from the state will compete for a National Championship.

Let me say this as smugly as possible with my nose high in the air – They are not true fans of the Beavers! They make me sick. To be an Oregonian means you must pick your loyalties! You must
stand either with the Beavers or with the Ducks. Either you’re with us or you’re against us! Either you’re all things Good, Beautiful, and True, thus you root for the Beavers; or you’re a conspirator with the Forces of Evil and you root for the Ducks. Please choose wisely. After all, this is the Civil War!

The Mimetics of Parenting

Okay. So, I’m being cheeky. But I’d like to talk about a danger here. When it comes to parenting, mimetic theory has taught me that we humans learn everything through a process of imitation. As social creatures, we are naturally open to the influence of others in our environment. Soon an imitative pattern of behavior develops. Children learn a pattern of behavior through their parents that is often formed in rivalry. One of the first things children learn from adults is to identify themselves over and against who they are not.

As a child, I learned from the adults in my life that to be an Ericksen is to be a Beavers fan. I also learned that to be an Ericksen meant I had to hate the Ducks.

Civil War language aside, sports rivalries may seem like mere playful fun. I mean, what’s the big deal? While childhood sports rivalries appear to be fairly harmless, they lay the foundation for a lifetime of rivalries. Children may begin to identify themselves in terms of sports rivalries, but this pattern of rivalry can’t be controlled. It spreads like a contagious disease to other areas of our lives. We soon learn to identify ourselves as “in” by identifying who is “out”; who is “good” by who is “bad.”

As we grow, we begin to discover other aspects of our identity that are formed in rivalry over and against others. For example, we learn to identify ourselves as good Democrats because they are evil Republicans; as good progressives because they are regressive fundamentalists; as responsible rich people because they are irresponsible poor people; as good Christians because they are evil Muslims; as smart NPR listening liberals because they are dumb Fox News watching conservatives.

Understanding this pattern of rivalry that children learn through imitating their parents helps me understand a biblical passage that I’ve always found troubling. It’s that verse near the beginning of the Ten Commandments where God is said to punish “children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but shows steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

I’m discovering that the “iniquity” of my parenting is setting my children up for a world of rivalry with others. Now, God isn’t actively punishing my children for my poor parenting skills. We do a good enough job of punishing one another in our rivalries.

God isn’t punishing us. Rather, God is trying to free us from our enslavement to rivalry. God is inviting us to re-pattern our lives away from rivalry and toward love. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” claims Leviticus. From within his religious tradition, Jesus expanded on
that love ethic so that it included even our enemies, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Beavers and Ducks: Can we share the pond?

Can we be freed from these rivalries? Or are we enslaved to them? Jesus told his followers that they must die to themselves in order that they might truly live. They must die to an identity that is formed in rivalry with others so that they might truly love their neighbors, who include even those they call their enemies...even those who are called *gasp* the Ducks!

Of course, this is bigger than Beavers and Ducks. It’s about rivalry in every aspect of our lives. But here’s the point: Transforming our pattern of rivalry into a pattern of love requires intention and spiritual discipline. It requires a daily, even hourly, refusal to divide the world into “us” versus “them.” It requires parents who will model for their children a desire for love, not a desire for rivalry. It requires a larger community of dedicated people that will gently hold one another accountable. It requires forgiveness. It requires prayer.

And in the game of spiritual football, it requires the nimble spirit of a quarterback to pass with the promise of Second Corinthians 5:19, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation with us.”

Is there hope that Beavers and Ducks can find reconciliation and share the same pond? To quote Jesus completely out of context, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

With God all things are possible, including the possibility that we might die to a self that is formed in rivalry so that we might live the life of love that God calls us into. A new identity that is no longer defined as “us” against “them.” Rather, with this new identity we discover a new pattern of living where Beavers and Ducks, Democrats and Republicans, Progressives and Evangelicals, Christians and Muslims all drop our violent addiction to rivalry so that we can pursue love and reconciliation.
Chapter 13: The Day I Became Darth Vader

January 23, 2013

*Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.*  

My dear, sweet Mother-in-Law threw me a birthday party last Sunday at her house. Now, when my Mother-in-Law throws a party, there is always a theme of epic proportions. She loves themes – for example, when we brought our daughter home from China we celebrated with Dora ... Dora. Dora. Dora the Explorer. Dora was everywhere. Dora dolls, pictures, streamers, balloons, paper plates and napkins filled our living room. It was as if someone from Nickelodeon threw up Dora all over our living room ... err ... I mean delightfully graced our living room with all things Dora.

The theme for my birthday was Star Wars. Which, due to my Mother-in-Law, was all kinds of awesome. She bought three Darth Vader masks, one for each of the Ericksen boys. And this 34-year-old Ericksen boy instantly thought: NEW FACEBOOK PROFILE PIC!!!!!!!!!!

I was still wearing my suit from church that morning and I thought the Darth Vader mask juxtaposed with the suit would be a great profile picture. But for a perfect picture, I wanted my boys to wear their masks. And I wanted them to cross their arms, as if we were a bunch of baaaad Darth Vader dudes.

Because a picture of a six year old in a Hawaiian shirt, a four year old in a flannel shirt, and their dad in a suit, each wearing a $2.99 plastic Darth Vader mask with their arms crossed just screams “baaaad dudes.”

As you can tell, not everyone liked my idea. My six year old refused to cross his arms. I kept asking him. I was playful at first. “C’mon! Do it for your Dad! It’s my birthday!” But he kept refusing. Of course, the more I wanted him to do it, the more he refused; and the more he refused, the more I wanted him to do it! So my mood quickly went from playful to anger and I became a Dark Lord of the Sith.
“If you don’t cross your arms right now ... well ... no cake for you!” And thus I channeled the horrifying combination of Darth Vader and ... umm ... the Cake Nazi? The poor boy went running upstairs to his bedroom in a self-imposed time out.

Parenting can be so hard. Shame lurks around every corner. Sometimes I shame my children when they refuse to do the things I want them to do. Then I feel shame because somewhere along the way I got the message that good children are supposed to submit to the will of their Fathers, so I must be doing something wrong. Then I think, Wait...I’m raising bad children!!! Maybe I’m too lenient! Maybe I’m too strict!! Oh crap. I suck at this. JUST CROSS YOUR ARMS!!!!!

But as I watched him walk up the stairs I realized that I’d shamed him with a ridiculous threat. I began to experience my own sense of shame as I realized I was in danger of becoming that Dad who loves his kids only when they conform to his demands.

In her book Daring Greatly, Brené Brown says that “Shame is the fear of disconnection ... [that we are] unworthy of connection.” That’s the problem with parenting strategies of threats and time outs. Time outs disconnect us from our children at a time when our children actually need a sense of connection. In other words, threats are the ultimate in shaming at a time when what children really need is to know their ultimate worth.

Six years ago I was talking with a trusted friend about my parenting fears. He gave me two pieces of advice that remain with me. The first was that my primary responsibility as a dad was to make sure my children know that I love them. It’s a simple point, yet also complicated. Among other things, love requires ensuring safety, opportunities, and providing appropriate boundaries for my children. But love also requires his second piece of advice, which was forgiveness. Forgive yourself for the inevitable mistakes you will make in parenting. With that advice in mind, I headed upstairs. When I found my boy, his head was buried under a pillow, which, of course, broke my Daddy heart. I sat next to him, rubbed his back, and told him I was sorry. He mumbled something very sad through his pillow and then told me he wanted some alone time.

“Okay.” I replied. “I love you. We’ll be eating downstairs. You can come when you are ready.”

Parents can beat ourselves up over these types of mistakes, playing them repeatedly in our minds. When our children see us doing that, it implicitly teaches them to beat themselves up.
over mistakes, too. In parenting, as in every aspect of our lives, without forgiveness we enslave ourselves and one another to past mistakes. Forgiveness frees us from those mistakes and frees us into a future of new possibilities; new patterns of behavior that move us away from being the Dark Lord of the Sith to reflecting an unconditional love that heals our relationships with our children.
Chapter 14: The Hellish Dream of a Parent: Why CS Lewis Was Wrong about Hell and Free Will

June 19, 2014

At five years old, my middle child has developed a defiant pattern. A typical day runs like this:

*It’s time to get dressed.*

*No.*

*It’s time to put on your shoes.*

*No.*

*It’s time to go to school.*

*No.*

*It’s time to eat dinner.*

*No.*

*It’s time to go to bed.*

*No.*

His defiance has apparently nestled its way into my subconscious because I dreamt about it last night. We were visiting my childhood house. My son was in our attached garage, which has a large room for a car and another smaller room for storage. There are no windows in the garage, so the only light comes from a ceiling lamp. I told him to come inside for dinner, but he refused in predictable fashion – “No.” For some reason that only happens in dreams, he decided put on a blind fold. My dream-state parenting skills kicked in and I thought, “Well, I’ll teach him a lesson. I’ll turn off the light, shut the door, and go back to watching television. That way he’ll literally be in the dark! That’ll teach him to behave!”

After about fifteen minutes of dream-time, I opened the door to check on him. I flicked on the ceiling light, but he was nowhere to be found. I looked throughout the main room – under the car, in plastic bins, on shelves. After a few minutes I stopped looking and listened for his voice. All I could hear was a faint whimper emanating from the smaller room. It was the voice of my
emotionally pained five year old attempting to yell for his daddy to rescue him from the dark corners of my childhood garage.

That’s when I woke up in a hot sweat. It was a hellish nightmare. The dream was so real and I was so horrified by how I treated him that I couldn’t get back to sleep. I rose from my bed and walked to the kitchen to pour myself a cup of water. After calming down, I checked on my children to make sure they were safe. I kissed all three on the forehead and apologized to my middle child.

Apologizing for my cruel parenting skills in a dream might seem a little excessive, but what I did in the dream was an extreme form of my worst parenting style. Like most parents, I can quickly become frustrated with my children when they disobey or ignore me. Sometimes I’ll spiral into an escalating rivalry with my children, demanding that they do something while they become even more determined in their defiance not to do it. Soon, I’ll threaten them with taking privileges away, or even with a time out.

Some may think that my parenting experience is natural. I often hear that children need to exert their independence, or free will, by defying their parents’ will. But there is no freedom in defiance. Defiance is not a form of free will; it’s a form of slavery. It’s a form of hell.

My dream is a good example of hell. Hell is a relational condition of being enslaved to rivalry with others, including God. A child’s defiance is not about free will and, more importantly, neither is a parent’s continued insistence. That relational dynamic is a sign of mutual enslavement to sin and it’s the path to hell. When it comes to hell, nobody damns themselves. We damn one another. As René Girard states, “Men create their own hell and help one another descend into it” (The Scapegoat, 134).

C.S. Lewis, Free Will, and Successful Rebels

That’s why I don’t buy C.S. Lewis’ argument about hell. In his book The Problem of Pain, Lewis couches his argument about hell around free will and states, “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside.” Like children rebelling against their parents, those in hell rebel against God. As always, Lewis’s argument is thoughtful and compelling, but I think he was wrong. Lewis claimed that the damned successfully rebel against God through their free will. “The doors of hell are locked on the inside” by those who freely choose and successfully rebel against God. But choosing to be in hell is not free will. It’s enslavement to a pattern of defiance and rivalry.

To be truly free, on the other hand, is to be created in the image of the God who is Love (1 John 4:8). Jesus called God his Abba, his Daddy, who freely says “Yes!” to everyone, even God’s own enemies. Thankfully, God is not like me – a parent who is enslaved to a relationship of rivalry with God’s own children. God doesn’t mimic the “No” of his children by responding with God’s own “No!” Paul wrote that Christ died for the ungodly to show God’s non-rivalrous love for everyone:
For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while were still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-11)

Lewis would agree that God loves everyone, but that certain people freely choose hell. But here’s the point, because our wills are not free but rather enslaved to rivalry, most of us would choose hell. In fact, we choose hell all the time. We are living in a hellish nightmare of violence. On a national level the news is full of political rivalry, school shootings, and family feuds. War threatens on a global level in Ukraine and Iraq, not to mention the continued war in Afghanistan and Syria. Climate change threatens human existence, yet there is little political will to stop its impact.

While we are enslaved to rivalry, God is the only entity that is truly free because God freely loves everyone. Our true freedom is found in God’s freedom to love with no strings attached. God’s will to love is the only will we should imitate. When we imitate one another’s will it leads to the hells of rivalry and violence. To rebel against God’s freedom to love all people, rather than seek to imitate it, is hell – something we choose all the time. That rebellion is not freedom; it’s slavery. If, in the name of freedom we refuse to allow God’s will, the source of freedom, to find a home within us, we engage in self-defeating tantrums.

Here’s my self-defeating tantrum: I want to say “No” to God! If it’s true that God proved God’s love for us in that Christ died even for sinners, then God freely loves everyone. But I don’t want God’s love to be free! I want God to love me and people like me. I certainly don’t want God to love my enemies! I’d rather God send my enemies to the far corners of a darkened garage where they spend eternity whimpering like a five year old. Now that would be justice!

Listen, I’m a work in progress – we all are. But human history reveals that asserting our “free will” leads us into a nightmare of rivalries with one another, because we’re not yet truly free to love as God loves. We have strings attached to our love. Which is why salvation doesn’t come down to our freedom to choose.

John Chrysostom, Hell, and the Salvation of the Entire Human Race

Christian tradition claims that John Chrysostom, a fourth century priest, was the greatest preacher of all time. This revered pastor and theologian pushes our views on hell. Contrary to Lewis, Chrysostom declared in his Homily on the Cemetery and the Cross that on Holy Saturday Christ broke into pieces the locks and the gates of hell. Chrysostom asks the rhetorical question, “So, if Christ breaks the pieces, who can repair it?” He then states,

This place of hell, dark and joyless, had been eternally deprived of light…[The inhabitants] were truly dark until the Sun of Righteousness descended into Hell, illumined it and made Hell Heaven. For where Christ is, there also is Heaven… So Christ, by his death bound the chief of robbers and the jailers, that is, the devil
and death, and transferred his treasures, that is, the entire human race, to his treasury.

Humans create hell. God transforms it into heaven for the entire human race. The icon above depicts that while humans help one another descend into hell, Christ pulls us out. Whether we freely choose it or not, the good news is that God is making all things new by pulling us out of the hells we have created. God does this by transforming our old patterns of relating to one another. Those old patterns are based on our enslavement to the hells of rivalry, envy, and violence. God is pulling us out of those patterns and into the new patterns of relating to one another that are based on God’s freedom to love and forgive.

So, as I lay in bed after checking on my children, I gave thanks that God is not a parent like me. Rather, God is like the Abba of Jesus, who is pulling the entire human race out of hell and into new patterns of relating that are based on love, mercy, and forgiveness.

(For more on hell and free will, see Kevin Miller’s work. Kevin blogs at his website “Hellbound?: Exploring faith and film, good and evil.” His post “Storming the four fortresses of hell – part 2” is a brilliant article on freedom. His documentary, Hellbound?, is the most important movie on the doctrine of hell that you can find. I highly recommend it!)
Chapter 15: The Day I Got Pissed at Jesus: An Account of Mimetic Rivalry

January 29, 2014

I hate to admit it, but I easily get caught up in mimetic rivalry. Oh sure, I can analyze how others get caught up in mimetic traps, but analyzing my own mimetic tendencies? I’d much rather stay in denial, but I can’t deny that it happened to me last week. And at the risk of making myself look like a total jerk, I’ll tell you about the day I got pissed at Jesus.

Last week, while 90% of North America was suffering in minus fifteen degree weather, my family and I went to Disney World in sunny Florida (Yep, I’m a jerk) and then we went on a Disney Cruise to the Bahamas where it was about 80 degrees! (Yep, I’m a total jerk!)

It happened on the cruise. (Please don’t hate me.) We were near the end of our trip and my two boys were swimming in the pool at one end on the roof of the cruise ship. At the other end was a ginormous movie screen playing Aladdin. In between the pool and the movie screen were rows of chairs. Each row had a set of chairs facing the pool and a set of chairs facing the movie.

Well, I found the perfect chair! Which was amazing because it was crowded – which made it even more perfect! It was my chair, just waiting for me! It was the chair facing the screen on the far right side of the back row. Sure, there were other seats available that would have been fine, but this chair was perfect! I could watch the movie and be close enough to my boys to keep an eye on them. All I’d have to do was stand up every 10-15 minutes and turn around to make sure they were still in the pool.

Now that’s some serious parenting skills.

A family of three soon approached my section. The wife asked if anyone was sitting in the two available seats next to me. Being an honest and relatively nice guy, I said, “No. Please, have a seat.”

They dropped off their stuff and the husband sat down while the wife and their daughter went to play in the pool.
Five minutes later I stood up, turned around, and took one step over to get a clear look at my boys. And guess what happened! THE DUDE STOOD UP! He was hawkin’ my chair! “Oh it’s on.” I thought. The chair took on even more importance as I continued to think to myself, “It’s me against you and I’m not leaving this chair.”

And then one of my boys came over and said he had to go potty.

I knew my chair was lost. It was a long walk to that bathroom. On the walk back I hoped against hope that Mr. Hawk would have left my chair alone, but no such luck. There he was. Sitting in my chair.

I stood by Mr. Hawk, who now sat in my chair, for about 30 seconds. I guess it was my passive aggressive attempt to intimidate him. I imagined him saying, “Oh I’m so sorry. Do you want your chair back? I was just saving it for you.” But no such luck. The more I stood by him the more my blood boiled. I was being nice, and then he stabbed me in the back! What a jerk!

But then Jesus had to start yapping at me. “C’mon Adam. Love your enemies. Be happy for him and his family. They get to sit together. Isn’t that great!”

And then I got pissed at Jesus. Like human beings are wont to do, I told Jesus to shut up and then I kicked him out of my head. “Go away, Jesus! That bastard stole my chair!”

My desire for the chair was mimetic. The more he wanted the chair the more I wanted it, too. But of course, it wasn’t really about the chair. Rivalry is never really about the object. There were plenty of other chairs that would have worked just fine. Rivalry with our fellow human beings is not about objects. Rivalry is about our relationship with our fellow human beings. Our relationship with others is infinitely more significant than our relationships with objects. I could have easily taken a different chair, but I was stuck in a rivalry with Mr. Hawk.

Well, I thought it would be a bad idea to get in a fist fight on a Disney Cruise – and besides, I’m a pacifist so there’s a solid chance he’d kick my ass. So, after he didn’t budge at my attempt to intimidate him, I jumped in the pool to hang out with my boys.

Of course, I kept looking at my chair to see if he’d ever get up so I could steal it back, but he never left his chair.
Chapter 16: Getting It “Right”: Parenting Easter Grace, and Friendly Glances

April 26, 2011

We had a wonderful Easter at the Ericksen household. We went to church. (Wisdom says a youth pastor shouldn’t play hooky on Easter.) We all got dressed up. My wife and I figure we have a few years of dressing our boys this way. Soon, they will refuse to dress up as “twins” as they will inevitably assert their “individuality.”

Of course, I hope that they find their individual passions. But, more than that, I hope they will discover that they will never really be “individuals” in our common use or the word. Rather, I hope they will discover that they are “interindividual.” Their identity is formed by each other. At a most basic level, they are brothers, and for them to remain brothers, they are dependent on each other.

For the most part, they are very good to each other. When one is upset, the other often tries to console him. It’s cute, especially because neither can pronounce his brother’s name quite right.

Of course, their identity is not only formed by each other, but they are also formed by their parents. Which is a scary thing, when my wife and I stop to think about it. Parenting is tricky business. We never know if we are doing it right. But what is “right” anyway? Are we allowing them to watch too much T.V.? Is “time-out” a bad idea? What will others think of us if we can’t control them?

That last one really gets me. I’m always worried about what others will think of my parenting abilities. I fall into the trap of thinking my children are a reflection upon me. So, during the
Easter service, we sat in the last pew, just in case our boys got rowdy and we needed to make a quick exit.

I’m beginning to realize that my anxiety about getting it “right” affects (or rather, infects) my children. They soak it in. My anxiety makes them anxious, and our shared anxiety needs an outlet. The first time they said something on Sunday morning I “shushed” them with great vigor. That, of course, didn’t help. So, we tried to distract them with suckers and toys. That worked better, but it was noisy. So noisy that I thought people in the front of the church would be distracted by our boisterous children – or their boisterous dad trying to “shush” them. I feared that we would at least get dirty looks from the people around us, but none came. Only friendly glances with smiling faces. A cynic might think they were smiles of contempt, but they weren’t. They were smiles of joy and welcome.

That’s what the church should be. A place of joy and welcome. So much of our world wants to marginalize young families – so we infect one another with dirty looks at restaurants, on airplanes, and in supermarkets. In response, we parents make up rules for our children and we “shush” them. We threaten them with “time-outs” and the loss of certain privileges. Unfortunately, all of that has a harmful effect. Children soak up that negativity. Indeed, we all soak up the negativity thrown our way and pass it along to others. It’s infectious. And, as a parent, I know how easy it is to emphasize the negative as opposed to the positive. That’s why we need friendly glances with smiling faces. I need to remind myself that people aren’t critiquing my parenting ability. And if they do, it’s more about them than it is about me. 99% of my anxiety is unnecessary, and the remaining 1% is probably unnecessary, too. That 1% just makes the situation worse.

Which is why I’m glad that on Easter my church reminded me of grace. It reminded me that we don’t have to do it “right.” It reminded me that what the world needs is a good kind of infection. The infection of friendly glances with smiling faces.
Part 3: Revelation

As we’ve seen, René Girard makes the claim that desire is mimetic and that it can lead to rivalry and the scapegoating mechanism. It doesn’t take much to find evidence to prove his theory. All one needs to do is search the New York Times, Fox News, MSNBC, or Huffington Post to see the dynamics at play.

But what makes Girard’s claim scandalous, especially in the academy, is his insistence that the Bible is our greatest source for revealing mimetic desire, scapegoating, and the solution to the violence that now threatens our very existence. Throughout the Bible, we see the sacrificial violence that unites the people of God together. But we also see that sacrificial violence critiqued, especially in the prophets who insisted that God “desires mercy, not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6).

Jesus took up that prophetic stance of mercy, not sacrifice. Instead of responding to violence mimetically, that is, with violence, he responded with nonviolent love. He practiced what he preached. He turned the other cheek. He loved his enemies. He prayed for those who persecuted him. And in the resurrection, Jesus offered peace to those who betrayed him. If there was anyone who had justification for revenge, it was Jesus. But he refused. In doing so, he revealed that God has nothing to do with violence. When we follow Jesus we discover that vengeance actually doesn’t belong to God because there is no vengeance within God. There is only love and mercy. Vengeance is human, not divine.

But Jesus reveals that God is working in the world to transform the way we relate to one another. Vengeance is human, but it doesn’t have to be. We always have the option of following the God of nonviolent love. From parenting to politics to business to religious establishments, we must learn to manage our violent tendencies in nonviolent ways or we risk self-destruction. As Girard states in his seminal book Violence and the Sacred, “For the first time [we are] confronted with a perfectly straightforward and even scientifically calculable choice between total destruction and total renunciation of violence” (240).

Jesus, quoting the Levitical priests before him, made it clear. The way to a better future is to “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” I hope that the forthcoming examples show that nonviolent love, not more of the same violence, is the answer to our parenting questions. But I’m convinced that the same nonviolent love is the answer to building peaceful communities in our schools, in our politics, and in our world.
Next month, my two year old son will turn three. Yes, the time is going by fast, but this isn’t a sappy “my children are growing up so fast” article. My children are growing up fast, and I do plan for this to be a pretty sappy article, but it’s not a “my children are growing up so fast” sappy article.

My son has a tremendous gift. It feels silly to say this, but in a very important aspect of life, I look up to this nearly three year old toddler. He’s a natural at doing something I have to work very hard at. And here’s where it gets a little sappy. My two year old knows how to love.

In fact, he’s my model for how to be a loving person. It’s crazy, I know. But this kid gets it. Last night, when I picked him up from daycare, his teacher smiled and said to me, “Oh, he’s so sweet. All he wants to do is cuddle.” His previous teachers have routinely sent slips of paper home that say, “He plays well with others, especially with girls. He’s so sweet.” On our drive home yesterday he asked me twice, “Daddy. You … you okay? Daddy. You … you appy?” (He repeats himself a bit and still has problems with the letter “h.” Part of his charm.) “Yes.” I replied, smiling to myself, amazed at how thoughtful he is. “I’m okay and I’m happy.”

Suzanne, my colleagues here at the Raven Foundation, is delivering a talk next week called “Beyond Power Struggles: Teaching Without Rivalry” at the Theology and Peace conference. She is going to explore Matthew 18, where Jesus’ disciples ask him, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” That, of course, is a question loaded with rivalry. Jesus’ response was very peculiar: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Not only does Jesus claim that little children reveal what the kingdom of heaven is all about, but then he states that we adults should become like those little snot factories. I’m left wondering, “Really?! Has Jesus been drinking some crazy juice? People in the kingdom of heaven are like little children?! What is that about?”

In the notes of my Oxford Annotated Bible, the editor states that “a child’s social status was little better than a slave” and that “little ones” refers to socially inferior and vulnerable
people. I’m sure that historical context plays an important part in a solid interpretation of this text, but surely Jesus meant more than that we should become like slaves and socially inferior.

The best I can do to explain this verse it to point to my two year old. He models for me how to love. He is radically open to others. He’s mimetic in the most positive of ways. That is, he is openly influenced by those around him. For example, we recently saw a news segment about people suffering from the devastation caused by the recent tornados. He visibly absorbed their suffering. His face cringed at the sight of pain and agony. On the other hand, if he sees someone smiling, he absorbs their joy and he smiles with them. He does all of this without worrying about what others will think of him. He is uninhibited in his mimetic nature.

Maybe that’s what Jesus meant when he said to become like little children. You see, I tend to do the opposite; I tend to cut myself off from the suffering I see around me. I justify that behavior with a defeatist attitude, thinking to myself, “It’s too much to look at” and “There’s nothing I can do about it anyway.” As an adult, I certainly don’t want to admit that I’m influenced by those around me. That, of course, is one of the biggest problems in the adult world. Adults are not supposed to admit that we are influence by others – it is a sign of weakness. Yet, it is precisely because we fail to admit this truth that we fall into rivalry with one another. So, to be like a child means to be so open to the emotions and feelings of those around us that we compassionately absorb those emotions and feelings into our very selves. Only then we can respond, “Are you okay? Are you happy?”

So, in the end, the kingdom of heaven is not like a rivalry among adults concerning who is the greatest. Rather, the kingdom of heaven is about being absorbed into another way of life – into the mimetically compassionate life of little children.
Chapter 18: Mickey Mouse, Mimetic Theory, and Saving a Villain

September 26, 2014

As a parent dedicated to mimetic theory, I know that the stories we tell our children pattern them in certain ways. Children have a remarkable capacity to learn not only reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also how to relate to others. Stories are particularly influential tools that teach children how to do just that. Of course, their learning potential can be patterned in relating to others in violent ways or in nonviolent and loving ways. And like so many parents who want to foster a strong sense of compassion in their children, especially compassion for their enemies, I struggle to find children’s books that tell compelling stories about compassion and reconciliation.

Mythical Stories and the Eternal Return

Children and adult stories typically follow the same pattern. There’s a conflict. The conflict leads to the formation of good guys and bad guys. The good guys work together and, after dramatically losing to the bad guys on multiple occasions, end up winning the day. The bad guys are either killed or expelled and peace is restored.

If you read ancient myths, you will discover that the same story of violence has been told since the beginning of human culture. Human history has seen an eternal return to violence and wars where good battles evil in the hopes to restore peace. And then we mythologize our violence through heroic stories of “good versus evil” that we tell to our children. But achieving peace through violent means never leads to lasting peace. If there’s one thing we should learn about the eternal return to violence in mythical stories, it’s that violence leads to more violence.

But what if we told a different story to our children? What if we told stories about conflict that didn’t end up with killing or expelling the bad guys, but rather ended with relationships being transformed and reconciled? Maybe our children would be patterned in a way that seeks compassion for and reconciliation with our enemies.
Mickey’s Alternative

Yesterday, my second child brought home a book called *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse: Super Adventures!* As I began reading it to him, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of parental angst as the story followed the same violent pattern as nearly every other story. Mickey and his friends turn into superheroes and unite to save the day from the evil villain Megamort, who wants to steal Mickey’s clubhouse by shrinking it with his shrink ray.

Oh the drama!

Of course, in the end Mickey and his team of superhero good guys win the day. But as Megamort attempts to make his escape, his plane springs a leak and zooms out of control. That’s when the ancient script of violence is flipped on its head and a new script of compassion and reconciliation emerges:

“Megamort needs our help!” shouts Mickey.

“But he’s a villain,” says Goofy.

“He still needs saving,” says Mickey.

Despite Goofy’s objection, Mickey and his friends safely bring the plane down and Megamort is transformed by their act of compassion.

“After all I did, I can’t believe you rescued me,” he says. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Megamort,” says Goofy.

“I’m really Mortimer Mouse,” Megamort reveals. “I’m your new neighbor ... I thought that if I took what you had, I’d be happy.”

“The Clubhouse is all about having friends,” says Mickey.

“That’s just it,” Mortimer admits. “I don’t have any friends.”

“You do now,” says Goofy.

This children’s story is revelatory for two reasons. First, as we’ve been talking about, the main principle of mimetic theory claims that we “desire according to the desire of another.” In other words, we really do try to “keep up with the Jones’.“ Like Mortimer Mouse, we tend to think
that if we just had what our neighbors have that we would then be happy. But as this story clearly shows, the mimetic aspect of desire more often leads to conflict and resentment than to happiness. That’s why the 10th Commandment warns us against coveting our neighbors stuff—it knows that our natural inclination is to desire according to the desires of another and that this leads to rivalry. Of course, underneath it all, it’s never really about our neighbor’s stuff. Like Mortimer, what we really desire is friendship, love, and happiness. That’s why the Bible says, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18).

The second aspect of the story that’s revelatory is that the conflict ensuing from “desiring according to the desires of another” often leads to the eternal return of conflict and violence, but it doesn’t have to. We aren’t enslaved to violence. We do have options. For example, Goofy suggests that Megamort should suffer the deathly consequences of his evil actions when he protests rescuing him from his demise by stating, “But he’s a villain.” Fortunately, Mickey provides a refreshing alternative of compassion by saving the villain.

Mickey models an alternative desire to the desire of mythical violence. It’s a desire that transforms us from wanting to kill or exclude our enemies to wanting to bless them and to reconcile with them. It’s the same alternative that we see developing in the Judeo-Christians Story. From Abraham and Sarah, who are called by God to be a blessing to “all the families of the earth” (Genesis 12), to Jesus who forgives his enemies who crucified him (Luke 23:34), and who reconciles “the world to himself, [by] not counting their sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19), we see that God sends us on a mission of blessing and reconciliation with everyone, but especially with those we call our enemies.

I’m glad to tell that divine story of reconciliation to my children wherever I can find it, even when it comes from Mickey Mouse.
When I was a boy, every night my Dad would tuck me into bed and lead me in prayer. We would close our eyes and fold our hand as my Dad would pray for individual members of my family, my friends and teachers, and for world peace.

At age 36, I can tell you that this bed time prayer ritual is one of the most important gifts that anyone has ever given to me. While my Dad no longer tucks me into bed and leads me in prayer (I am 36, after all!), the ritual has stuck with me. In fact, my night time prayer routine helped me get through middle school, high school, college, and graduate school. It was there when my Mom died of cancer when I was 20. I took it with me when my wife and I joined the Peace Corp. I brought it back with me 10 days later when we became Peace Corp drop outs. It was there for me on those two nights that my sons were born. And it was there on the night that we adopted our daughter.

That prayer has always given me a sense of peace and calm during good times and bad. The repetition of my Dad’s night time ritual provided me with a deep sense that I was loved. Not just by my Dad, but also by God.

As a father of three children, my Dad is my model for how to be a good father. So, I’ve decided to pass the night time prayer ritual along to the next generation. I pray with my children in the same way that my Dad prayed with me. We start with the same opening:

Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep.
And if I die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.

I’ve since discovered that the prayer continues, “If I should live for other days, I pray the Lord to guide my ways.” My Dad never prayed that happier ending. Maybe he didn’t know it. Or maybe he wanted to torment his son with the thought of death!
I’m pretty sure that wasn’t the reason. But I also know that it prepared me for the death of my mother.

Our culture doesn’t prepare us for death very well. We like to keep it at arms-length. But the truth is that death is unavoidable – grandparents, parents, children, and even pets. As much as we’d like to avoid it, we know about death from an early age. Paradoxically, the more we try to suppress the truth about death, the more power we give it over our lives. The gift that my Dad gave me in the opening of our prayer was the knowledge that death is natural. We don’t have to fear it. Instead, we can know that in life and in death, God is there with us.

The other night I was praying with my eight year old son. He’s a very curious boy. So, when I finished, he sat up, opened his eyes, and said, “Dad, there was something really weird about that prayer. I mean, what’s the deal with that part that says, ‘If I should die before I wake?’”

I remember asking the same question to my Dad when I was about eight years old. I can’t remember how he responded. But the years of praying those words prepared me for this answer: “You’re not going to die tonight. But at some point, everyone dies. And that’s okay. You don’t have to be afraid of it. Because I love you. And so does God.”

“Okay Dad,” my son replied. Then he laid back down and fell asleep.
Chapter 20: My Daughter, the Star Wars Myth, and Jesus

August 11, 2015

I recently dropped my daughter off at her elementary school’s summer kindergarten program. When I opened the side door of our mini-van, she had a huge smile on her face as she held up a Darth Sidious Pez Dispenser.

I was a little shocked by the juxtaposition of my daughter and Darth Sidious – who is arguably the greatest fictional depiction of pure evil during the last 35 years. I was shocked partly because I have no idea where that Pez Dispenser came from. I didn’t buy it, but somehow it appeared in our van that day.

But I was also shocked because she was all smiles and feeling a sense of joy as she held up this ugly sign of evil. Wookipedia states that Darth Sidious “was evil incarnate” and “the living incarnation of the dark side of the Force.”

I’m biased, but I think my daughter is adorable and all things good. And there she is, smiling and holding this symbol of “evil incarnate.”

In that moment, I think my daughter taught me something about defeating evil.

The Star Wars Myth

I grew up watching the original trilogy. Sometimes I would pretend to be sick on Sunday mornings so I wouldn’t have to go to church. When I heard my parents start their car, I’d run to our living room and play a Star Wars movie on our VCR. (I know. I’m old.) Star Wars had a mythical, even religious, element for me.

I still love the Star Wars saga, but as I discovered mimetic theory, I began to see it with different eyes. Star Wars is based on a myth, a lie that tries to conceal the truth about violence. Now, there is moral nuance within Star Wars when it comes to violence. For example, after Luke defeats Darth Vader in Episode VI, he refuses to kill him. This act of nonviolence puts Luke in jeopardy as Darth Sidious nearly kills him with lightning bolts, but Luke’s act of nonviolent
mercy converts Darth Vader to the “good guys.” Darth Vader then saves Luke by killing Darth Sidious.
That dramatic scene sums up the myth behind Star Wars. Walter Wink calls it the “myth of redemptive violence.” In his book, *The Powers that Be*, Wink describes the myth of redemptive violence as, “the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world.”

When we are under the spell of the myth of redemptive violence, we think that our “good violence” will save us from our enemies “bad violence.” Thus, Darth Vader saves Luke with “good violence” by killing Darth Sidious. But if there is a truth that emerges from the Star Wars myth, it’s that “good violence” never actually solves the problem of evil; rather, it gives evil the oxygen it needs to spread. And so, even though the evil Darth Sidious was killed and Darth Vader converted, the truth is that Jedi violence never solves the problem of evil. Thus, we have three more movies coming out. (And I cannot wait!)

Rene Girard, the founder of mimetic theory, points to the utter futility of violence in his book *Battling to the End*. Violence is futile because it functions to perpetuate itself. He claims that “it is impossible to eliminate violence through violence.” He goes on to give an apocalyptic warning, “Sooner or later, either humanity will renounce violence without sacrifice or it will destroy the planet.”

**How to Defeat Evil**

But if violence doesn’t work to defeat evil, what does? In holding the Darth Sidious Pez Dispenser, my daughter gives us a clue. The more we fight evil on its own violent terms, the more we become the very evil we attempt to defeat. But there are alternatives to defeating evil. What if we had posture towards evil that didn’t combat it with our own violence, or run away from it in fear, but gently held it in our hands?

Christians believe that Jesus definitively defeated the forces of evil. For Christians, faith is trusting that the way to defeat evil is the same way that Jesus defeated evil on the cross and in the resurrection. Jesus was no Jedi. He didn’t use “good violence” to protect himself or others from the evil forces that converged against him. Nor did he run from evil. Rather, he defeated evil by entering into it, forgiving it on the cross, and offering peace to it in the resurrection.

Of course, many – even those who profess to follow him – think Jesus is absolutely crazy. As the apostle Paul wrote, “We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” It’s true that following Jesus by responding to evil with nonviolent love is risky. After all, Christ was killed, as were his disciples. But fighting violence with violence is also risky and only perpetuates a mimetic cycle of violence.
The myth of redemptive violence still permeates our culture. We see it everywhere: In cartoons, movies, and politics. But the myth is losing its force as more people are seeing through its lies and realizing that violence can no longer defeat violence.

Although the forces of evil were defeated on the cross and in the resurrection, evil is obviously still present with us today. Unfortunately, many Christians have more faith in violence to defeat that evil than they do in Jesus Christ. But true Christian faith trusts that Jesus had it right.

The way to defeat evil is to nonviolently love our enemies as we love ourselves.

The way to defeat evil is to forgive it.

The way to defeat evil is to trust that God doesn’t defeat evil through violently taking life, but by restoring life.
Chapter 21: Good Friday, Superheroes, and Blueberry Stains

April 03, 2012

My boys at breakfast. That’s a blueberry stained face. As breakfast continued, so did the stain, as you will see below.

It’s Holy Week, so I thought that when the opportunity presented itself, I’d talk with my sons (ages 5 and 3) about Good Friday and the death of Jesus.

An opportunity came this morning at breakfast.

“Dad.” Began the oldest Boy. “What days do we have school this week?”

“Every day except for Friday.” I responded. “Do you know why you don’t have school on Friday?”

“No.”

“Because it’s Good Friday.” At which point I got all excited. “Do you know what happened on Good Friday?”

“No.”

“It’s the day they killed Jesus,” I replied with a little more enthusiasm than I expected.

He became sullen. “Jesus was killed?” he asked.

Oh boy. This was a little more awkward than I thought. We’ve talked a lot about the life of Jesus, but not so much about his death. How do you talk to a 5 year old and a 3 year old (with a blueberry stained mouth...) about Good Friday? I figured I’d just go for it.

“Yes. And here’s what’s good about it. Jesus responded by forgiving them. And that’s how God works. God forgives. You know how Superheroes hurt the bad guys?” (I brought up Superheroes because, well, to be
honest, we talk a lot more about Superman than we do about Jesus.) “Well, instead of trying to hurt the bad guys, Jesus forgave them. Pretty neat, huh?”

“Not really.”

Ooops!

I’m not really sure why my 5 year old responded that way, but I can think of at least one reason that Jesus’ forgiveness might not be “neat.” Every year around Holy Week I bring up the forgiveness passage in Luke 23:34 to my youth group. As Jesus died on the cross, he speaks words of forgiveness to those who crucified him. Here’s the quote, “Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.’” A few years ago, a very insightful member of my youth group articulated her difficulty with the passage. She wished Jesus hadn’t said it because it “lets people off the hook.”

I don’t know about you, but I understand where she was coming from. We want justice and letting people off the hook feels unjust. But I think Jesus challenges our desire for justice. The radical forgiveness of Good Friday is universal, so it does let people off the hook. But here’s why I think Jesus’ universal forgiveness is important: if we seek to keep others on the hook, we will soon find ourselves on the hook with them. For example, if Jesus wanted to keep those who killed him on the hook, he would have prayed for vengeance, not forgiveness. His vengeance would create a cycle of retributive violence, putting both him and his killers on the same hook of injustice and violence. Instead, Jesus’ radical offer of forgiveness invited those who killed him to step away from the hook of violence and step into the only alternative, which is forgiveness.

So, my 5 year old didn’t think the forgiveness of Good Friday is “neat,” but I know that he gets it. Children understand Jesus’ forgiveness better than many adults do. My boys, for example, will fight over seemingly insignificant things, but the fight will last about three minutes and then they’ve moved on and are back to being friends again. Forgiveness may or may not have been officially offered and received, but forgiveness is there. Indeed, they have let each other off the hook of anger and violence. We adults, on the other hand, will fight over seemingly insignificant things and the fight can last decades. Most of the time we forget what we’re even fighting about! That’s because we’re not really fighting over some “thing.” We hold on to these grudges because they give us a sense of identity. We like to keep people on the hook of our anger and violence because it allows us to identify them as bad and us as good.

Jesus told his followers to become like children. (See Matthew 18:3.) I think Good Friday tells us that it’s time to forgive like children. Yes, we will have conflicts with others, but it’s time to step away from verbal, emotional, and physical forms of violence and step into the spirit of forgiveness. Indeed, it’s time to start letting people off the hook of our vengeance, otherwise the destructive cycles of violence will continue. As René Girard claims at the end of his book The Scapegoat, “The time has come for us to forgive one another. If we wait any longer there will not be enough time” (212).
We forgave him for the blueberry stains. And yes. It is April 3rd and that is a Jack-O-Lantern in the background. He loves Halloween.
I took Religion 101 in college. In that class I learned that religions ask ultimate questions about life. For thousands of years, humans have been asking the same kinds of questions, like: “Who is God?” “What is the meaning of life and death?” “How do we understand good and evil in the world?” and, the question that every father has asked since the beginning of human culture, “Why is it that, whenever moms go on a business trip, everything falls apart?”

My wife flew to Minneapolis last Tuesday, leaving me all alone with our three children...

Whenever this happens, my children have a way of reverting to behavior they haven’t exhibited in six months. For example, it was bath night. So I had all three kids in the tub and ... what do toddlers do in the bathtub? Yeah, my daughter pooped. (I’m pretty sure that’s the first time in history that anyone has ever used the word “poop” in a sermon – and I love you for letting me say it – and I thank you in advance for not telling my daughter that story when she enters middle school.)

It was also the first night in about six months that our middle child had an intense fear of the dark and screamed relentlessly for his mommy. In addition, all three of them requested eggs for dinner, but then refused to eat them. My daughter yelled, “I want chicken nuggets!” And then climbed out of her chair, fell to the ground, and continued to kick and scream, “I want chicken nuggets!” This is when parents say, “Oh, she missed her nap.” She may have had nine naps that day, but if she gets fussy, obviously she missed a nap and needed another one! But, I mean, what’s a father to do? I didn’t want to give in, so I mimicked her frustration and gently raised my voice, saying, “You will eat your eggs and you will like them!”

That response was not entirely helpful...

To make matters worse, it was the first official day of summer camp for my boys. I took my daughter with me to pick them up at the park. As the head counselor introduced herself and talked with me about their homework, I tried to keep an eye on the kids. Of course, my middle child befriended a neighborhood boy who apparently invited him over to his house, because they were walking together away from the park; my daughter was awkwardly climbing a 6-foot-
rock-wall with three children twice her age; fortunately, my oldest child was safe, or so I thought, as he played tag with four other kids.

Well, I weaned myself away from the teacher, yelled for my middle child to come back, grabbed my daughter off the rockwall, and took them to get my oldest child. You should know that my oldest child takes after his dad, which means he’s a klutz. Just as we walked up to him, he slipped on the wet and extremely muddy ground. The back of his pants and shirt were covered in mud. I checked him and, physically, he was fine, so I told him to get up and follow us to the car. I carried my daughter, my middle child followed beside me, but the oldest remained at a distance. I looked back periodically and noticed he was slowly walking backwards to the car, in tears. The closer he got to the car the louder he wailed. I asked him what was wrong, but he couldn’t talk because he was so upset. My emotions were mixed – I had compassion as I said, “Oh my poor boy,” but I also felt frustration, because I couldn’t calm him down, and then I began to realize that I would have to spend part of the night cleaning a muddy car. After about ten minutes of crying and refusing to get in his car seat, he calmed down and told me that his friends were making fun of him for falling in the mud and that he would never-ever-ever-in-no-way-in-a-million-years go back to camp the next day.

I know many of you have had similar parenting experiences where it is hard to keep your cool. I had conflicting emotions that night – of love and frustration and patience and anger – and I didn’t always handle it well. I don’t always get this fatherhood thing right, but like all of you fathers and mothers here today, I try to love and parent my children as best I can.

Fatherhood and the Bible

What does fatherhood have to do with our sermon series on worship? Well, in our New Testament passage from John today, Jesus refers to God as Father. In fact, Jesus frequently refers to God as his Father. Now, calling God “Father” makes many of us uncomfortable, and for good reason. We frequently hear of deadbeat dads, fathers who abuse or inspire fear in their children, or who abandon their families altogether. Father’s Day might be very difficult for many of us who grew up with that kind of father. Father’s Day may also be difficult for you if you are mourning the loss of your father. This day is also difficult for men and women who haven’t been able to have a child. If you are in one of these situations, know that you are not alone. God is with you, and so are your friends here at church.

Another problem we have with the idea of God as Father is that it seems to support a patriarchal system where men have all the power. Many view God as a distant, all-powerful, and arbitrary Father who is in control of all things. If we pray the right prayers, worship in the right way, and do the right things then this god will bless us. But if we don’t do things right, then god will punish us. The problem with this concept is that bad things happen to us no matter what we do. So we tend to ask, “Why, if God is in control of all things, does He cause bad things to happen to good people?”
I want to invite you to take that all-powerful and arbitrarily punishing god out of your mind, because that god is an idol. Sure, you can find that god in the Bible. Take our passage from Exodus, for example. Near the end of that passage, we discover these words, “You shall not make for yourself and idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.”

Well, steadfast love is nice, but if your parents messed up, you and your descendants were punished. Not because of anything you did, but because you had a dead beat dad. I don’t know about you, but a god who punishes children for their dead-beat dads sounds like a dead beat god to me. Is that really what God is like? If we were fundamentalists, we would have to say, “The Bible says it, so I believe it.” But the problem with the fundamentalist reading of the Bible is that it doesn’t keep reading the Bible.

**Debating the Character of God**

If you keep reading the Bible, you will come across one of the most important prophets in Jewish tradition, a man named Ezekiel. The Exodus passage says God will punish children for the iniquity of their parents, but Ezekiel says the exact opposite: “A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent, nor a parent suffer for the iniquity of a child; the righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own.”

So what is God like? Does God punish generation after generation, as Exodus claims, or is each generation responsible for themselves, as Ezekiel claims? There are many examples of these debates about God in the Bible. Here’s another: does God desire sacrifice, as Leviticus says, or does God desire mercy, not sacrifice, as the prophet Hosea says?

The Bible was written by people who were debating and struggling to understand what God is like. There are different strands and answers within the Bible and we have to pick which strand to live by. Some people want to merge all the strands together, but that’s impossible. Either God punishes generation after generation for the sins of the parents, or God doesn’t. Either God desires sacrifice, or God desire mercy. You have to choose which strand to believe.

**Jesus’ Loving Daddy**

But here’s the thing: if we are interested in following Jesus, then we should look for which strand he chose. Jesus explained how he interpreted the scriptures when he told some of his questioners, “Go and learn what this means, [God] desires mercy, not sacrifice.” If we take Jesus as our model for interpretation, we will know that God doesn’t punish generation after generation. No, God shows mercy to generation after generation.
From within his Jewish tradition, Jesus transforms our understanding of God by choosing to emphasize certain biblical strands. Another way he does this is by calling God “Father.” There are a few passages in the Old Testament that refer to God as Father, but Jesus takes this minor strand and emphasizes it. Now, the word that Jesus uses for Father is Abba. New Testament scholar Marcus Borg claims that “Abba is an Aramaic word used by children to address their father. Used by young children...it is much more like the English [word] papa...The word is relational, familial, intimate.”

When Jesus called God his Abba, he was critiquing any notion of a patriarchal God that used power, might, and authority capriciously, and that inspired fear in all his children. Jesus came to transform that idolatrous view of God and our understanding of true fatherhood. True fatherhood is based on the Fatherhood of God, who Jesus referred to in one of the most intimate and loving ways known to humans, as a young child addresses a tender and loving father – an Abba, a papa, even a daddy. Jesus and his Abba lived in an intimate relationship of mutual love, compassion, and devotion.

**The God of Forgiveness**

But there’s more. As opposed to a human father like myself, who mimics the frustration of his children when they fall in mud or demand chicken nuggets for dinner, Jesus reveals that his Abba does not mimic our frustrations and anger. Rather, when Jesus was forced on the cross, he responded to human violence not with prayers of divine revenge, but with prayers of forgiveness. When Jesus was resurrected, he did not come back to lead a violent crusade against his enemies, rather he came back to offer peace to those who betrayed him. He then told his followers to spread that peace to all the nations.

That is what God, Jesus’s Abba, is like. As one of Jesus’ earliest followers put it, “God is love and in him there is no darkness at all.” Any view of God that is contaminated with darkness, violence or hatred is an idol, a projection of our own human emotions.

**A Message of Fatherly Love, Not Punishment**

Jesus invites us to relate to God in the same way he did, to call God our Father, our Papa, our Daddy. This changes not only the way we relate to God, but it begins to change the way we relate to our fellow human beings. If we are to follow Jesus in imitating God, we will seek to love our fellow human beings in the way God loves all people. This different way of relating to God also helps me make sense of our difficult passage this morning from the Gospel of John. “The hour is coming...when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” That passage is difficult for me because of the loaded word “truth.” Our postmodern sensibilities are uncomfortable that word. We
would much rather say that everything is relative. But the truth is that we can’t get away from truth statements. Even asserting that everything is relative is a truth statement!

**The Truth: God is Love**

As uncomfortable as this may sound, when it comes to God, there is truth and there is idolatry. The truth, according to Jesus, is that God is love. God is like a loving dad who responds to his children not with the power of violence, anger, and wrath, but with the nonviolent power of forgiveness, compassion, and love, always seeking after us the way a loving dad seeks after his children.

So may we come together to worship God in truth.
May we come to know that God is fathering and mothering us into relationships of love, compassion, and forgiveness.
And may we come to know our Abba’s love for us and for the world.
Amen.

*Footnotes*

1. Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, of a Religious Revolutionary*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 129. Some readers will know that this is controversial statement that has come under fire since Joachim Jeremias proposed it in his 1971 book *New Testament Theology*. Biblical scholar James Barr wrote an article in 1988 titled “Abba Isn’t Daddy.” Wonder of wonders! It seems that biblical scholar disagree! New Testament scholar Mary Ann Tolbert says something very similar to Borg, “*Abba* is an Aramaic term used by a child for its father” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003) 1,839. NT Wright, another biblical scholar, says in his book *Mark for Everyone* that, “*Abba* is the Aramaic word for ‘father’; not simply a children’s word, but always carrying intimate affection and devotion.” (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 198. According to Wright, *Abba* is an affectionate term that young and adult children used when addressing their fathers. See also Thomas Cahill’s book *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, “*Abba* is Hebrew/Aramaic not for ‘Father’ but for a more familiar term of endearment, such as ‘Papa’ or ‘Daddy’” (New York: Anchor Books, 1999) 131. My point here is that Jesus transforms our understanding of God, not as a distant Father who capriciously punishes, but as a loving father, who is much more like a loving dad than a distant father.

2. For more on this, see Michael Hardin’s reflection entitled “Jesus’ Abba” in his book *The Jesus Driven Life*, 39.
Chapter 23: Rock, Paper, Scissors … GOD! – Children and a Nonviolent Reading of the Bible

August 26, 2014

Last April, my family moved to Eugene, Oregon. Eugene is located in Linn County. This is all you need to know that important fact:

Linn County is the “Grass Seed Capital of the [FREAKIN] World.”

Guess who is allergic to grass seed? Yeah, that’s right. Me. My face has been a hideous mess of goopy sludge emanating from my nose and eyes.

I’ve tried everything to soothe my pain. Claritin. Allegra. Zyrtec. Nothing worked. The only thing that provided any relief were frozen blueberry waffles:
So, I decided I needed allergy shots. In addition to this being the summer of the merciless grass seed, it’s also been the summer of Daddy-Day-Care at the Ericksen house. So, when I went to my first appointment, I took my three children with me.

**Childhood Games and a Violent God**

As we sat in the waiting room, my boys decided to play Rock, Paper, Scissors. At ages 7 and 6, they have become very skilled, so I recently decided to introduce them to the ultimate weapon – dynamite. Dynamite is made just like the rock, only you lift up your thumb to create the fuse. With the colossal “BOOM!” sound effect, dynamite utterly destroys rock, paper, and scissors.

At least, it used to be the ultimate weapon of destruction. While waiting for my shots, my oldest boy came up with an ever more destructive weapon – *God*.

After a few rounds of the game, he activated the omnipotent God weapon. When he did, all hell broke loose. “Rock, paper, scissors … GOD!” he yelled. Then he lifted both hands high in the air and violently threw them down with the thunderous sound of hell-fire and brimstone on top of his younger brother.

*God. The Destroyer.*

I know it’s just a game, but as the good mimetic theorist that I am, I’ve spent their young lives trying to teach them that God isn’t like that. As First John 1:5-7 teaches us, I try to teach them...
that, “God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” No darkness. No violence. Only love. We are the Destroyers. We are the ones who rain down hell-fire and brimstone upon one another. God doesn’t do that.

**Biblical Violence**

Of course, many people will point to passages in scripture where God does rain down hell-fire and brimstone upon people. Take, for example, the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19. All you need is verse 24 from that chapter to explain a violent view of God: “Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the Lord out of heaven.”

I remember learning that story, and many others like it, in Sunday school. Without any qualms or hesitation, I was taught that God nearly destroyed the whole earth though a flood and that God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah through fire. The Bible is full of violence, both human and divine. This really shouldn’t surprise us. After all, we moderns don’t have a good track record with violence, either. Whether we justify our violence in the name of God or national security or freedom or whatever, the outcome is always the same violent destruction of hell-fire and brimstone.

Still, we moderns like to critique the Bible for its violence, but the truth is that the Bible provides a huge leap forward in the human understanding of the relationship between violence and the divine. After all, if you look at other ancient myths, the gods of all religions were violent. In fact, the gods of Babylon, Rome, and Greece were not only violent, but also fickle. You never knew what would send those gods into a violent rage. Take the Babylonian flood story, for example. The Babylonian gods destroyed the world with a flood because humans were being too noisy, causing the gods to lose sleep. The biblical flood story is horrific, but it’s a huge step forward in the human understanding of the divine. In the biblical story, God’s problem wasn’t with human noise causing God to lose sleep; it was with human violence that led to death and destruction. And, as terrible as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was, we can say something similar about that story. According to Ezekiel 16:49, God’s problem with those nations was that they refused to show hospitality to strangers and to aid the poor and needy members of their society.

**The Bible’s Critique of Violence**

While those are huge steps forward in the human understanding of the divine, they don’t go far enough. They still claim that God is violent. But the Bible contains a critique of its own violent version of God, and there is no more important story for Christians to claim the nonviolence of God than the story of Jesus.
Jesus, of course, was Jewish and was formed by his religious tradition. But what many modern Christians don’t understand is that within Judaism there have always been multiple interpretations of the Bible. Ancient rabbis had their schools of thought, where they provided instruction on interpreting the Bible.

Jesus, whom Christians claim to be our Rabbi or Teacher*, provided specific instruction for interpreting the Bible, and specifically for how to interpret biblical violence. On multiple occasions, Jesus quoted the prophet Hosea, instructing anyone who would listen to:

“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice’” (Hosea 6:6).

In his Adult Education Course entitled Jesus the Forgiving Victim, James Alison claims “This is not just a particular commandment. It is a reading instruction, a hermeneutical key. Whenever you interpret anything, you can read it two ways: in such a way that your interpretation creates mercy, and in such a way that it creates sacrifice...‘Mercy’ and ‘sacrifice’ are not here discrete religious gestures. Each one is an entire anthropology of God’s desire, and they are incompatible with each other.”

The theology behind the violent sacrificial strand within the Bible, such as the Sodom and Gomorrah story, is incompatible with the theology behind the “mercy and not sacrifice” strand within the Bible.

Jesus’ Critique of Sacred Violence

Not only did Jesus teach that God desires mercy and not sacrifice, he enacted God’s desire for mercy and not sacrifice. For example, Jesus implicitly critiqued the theology of sacred violence behind the Sodom and Gomorrah story when he sent his disciples ahead of him to a Samaritan village. The Samaritans rejected Jesus and his disciples (Luke 9:51-56). When James and John, two of Jesus’ disciples, heard this, they channeled the same sacred violence in the Sodom and Gomorrah story. They said to Jesus, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” Jesus, who had been teaching his disciples to love their enemies, which clearly meant they shouldn’t command fire or missiles or bombs to come down from heaven upon their enemies, rebuked his disciples and he simply led them on to the next town.

Notice that the disciples had an interpretative lens of sacrificial violence, not mercy. In rebuking his disciples, Jesus rebuked the whole idea of sacred violence; the idea that God has anything to do with violence.

Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me” (Matthew 19:14). Before we take our children to stories depicting sacred violence, such as the flood and Sodom and Gomorrah, we need to take
them to Jesus. Jesus saves the world not through sacrificial violence, but through merciful love. The disciples mistakenly thought they could achieve God’s purposes through sacrificial violence. Unfortunately, we continue to make this mistake today, and we unwittingly indoctrinate our children into that same theological mistake. And pretty soon they start dropping the God hand in Rock, Paper, Scissors!

Yet, Jesus calls us to follow him, to “go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” With that teaching Jesus, and the prophet Hosea before him, critiqued sacrificial violence. With his merciful life, death, and resurrection, Jesus offered forgiveness to break the cycle of violence and he revealed the nonviolent love of God that reaches out to all people.
Conclusion: Wait! One More Thing – Remember to Relax

My good friend, theologian James Alison, has completely changed the way I relate to God. Before I met James, I thought that faith was something that I had to have and I tried so hard to have it! When I was in college, I was involved with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. Fortunately, I didn’t have to be an athlete to be involved. It was open to anyone, which was good because the most athletic thing I ever did in college was give up 27 runs as the pitcher for my intramural softball team.

But I remember going to FCA events and looking in awe upon the spiritual all-stars who ran the show. They were a few years older than I was. They played guitar, led the songs, and delivered the messages. They would tell stories about how they heard God pushing them to talk with total strangers – so they did! And then they would tell us how they shared the Gospel with them.

I thought that was so cool! So, I tried it. I remember getting a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach as I walked through campus and saw a stranger. “Hmm,” I thought to myself. “Is that God telling me to talk to this person?” But I decided it was probably something I ate earlier at the school cafeteria.

As I walked away from the person, I started to shame myself. I thought that it actually was God calling me to talk to that person and share the Gospel with them. I failed and I felt like a coward because I didn’t think I had the faith that my FCCA friends had.

I was stuck in a mimetic rut. When it came to faith, René Girard was absolutely right – I desired according to the desires of another. In this case, I wanted to have the faith and courage of my friends. And the harder I tried, the more I failed. In other words, my friends in faith had become my rivals in faith.

But James changed everything for me. He taught me that faith isn’t about trying harder. Rather, faith is about relaxing into God. In his adult education series, Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice, James says that faith is about being, “able to relax into the realization that being good or bad is not what it’s about. It’s about being loved.”

That spiritual truth has changed my theological outlook. I no longer have to compare my faith with the faith of “spiritual all-stars.” That comparison misses the point entirely. The point is that I and you and they are already and always loved. So now I can relax, knowing that faith isn’t so much about me trying harder; it’s about receiving the love God already has for me. That realization is a great spiritual truth, but it’s also great wisdom for parents.
Relax Into Parenting

I often find myself comparing my parenting abilities to other parents. There are some parents who seem to be able to do it all. They have their children in every extra-curricular activity, their children happily do their homework, they get dressed on time, and they say “Please” and “Thank you.”

My children don’t always do those things. In fact, sometimes it’s a struggle to get out of the door in the morning. Sometimes we have to remind them to say “Please” and “Thank you.”

I’m learning that that’s okay. I’m also learning that those perfect families, along with those who seem to have perfect faith, aren’t so perfect. In fact, they spend a lot of time and energy trying to look perfect. And if that’s how they want to spend their time and energy, God bless them.

But I can’t. My children are wonderful people. They are three of the greatest joys of my life. But it’s not their job to bow down to my every wish. It’s not their job to perfectly do everything I tell them to do. And as you can tell from the stories in this ebook, the more I try to control them, the more they are likely to push back. Should I expect anything else? After all, I don’t like it when people try to control me, either.

I’m not saying that children don’t need boundaries. We all need boundaries. What I want to do is to give you permission to relax into parenting. My children have not hit every developmental benchmark that their pediatricians or their teachers tell us they should be at. And that’s okay. Like all of us, children go at their own pace. Cultural standards for childhood development can be a good guideline, but they are just guidelines. Comparing ourselves to them is a dangerous trap. Don’t give them more power than they deserve.

Naming Our Emotions and Finding Peace

Another important aspect of relaxing into parenting is the ability to manage our emotions. Typically, nobody ever teaches us how to manage them. Because of that, we are left with the sense that we don’t control our emotions, rather our emotions control us.

But, in order to dodge many of the parenting traps, it’s important to take responsibility for our emotions. For parents, a vital way of doing that is to name and communicate them to our children. What we do with our emotions matters in every relationship, but especially with our children. We’ve seen how emotions are mimetic – that they are contagious and they spread quickly. When one person is angry with someone else, that person will often respond with anger. In fact, we can start to feel like we don’t have anger, but anger has us.

Before we can take responsibility for our emotions, we need to be able to name them. Are you feeling happy? Sad? Frustrated? Angry? Joyful? Once we name those emotions, we can communicate them to others. For example, are you having a happy experience with your children? Tell them how happy you. Let them know the joy you had with them when you went
to the park or the museum or the store. Say something like, “I just want you to know how happy I am spending time with you right now.”

But don’t be afraid to calmly name and express more negative emotions with children. There are times when we feel frustrated or angry. Gently name and communicate those emotions before you get to the stage where your frustration seems to be controlling you. You can do that by putting your feelings on the table - “I’m feeling frustrated because ... I’ve asked 1,500 for you to brush your teeth and you haven’t done it.”

(Not that that’s ever been said in my house...)

Communicating emotions to our children is important because it models for them how to name and manage their emotions. The earlier children learn how to manage their emotions in productive ways by naming and communicating them, the more likely they will develop the tools to manage them later in life. Because communicating our emotions in nonviolent ways to our spouse, coworkers, friends, and neighbors is just as important as communicating them to our children.

Relax – You are Loved

I love James’s statement that faith isn’t about being good or bad. It holds true for parenting. I’ve made so many mistakes. I’ve forgotten to name and communicate my emotions to my children. So often, I’ve felt like my emotions were controlling me. There have been times when I’ve been a bad parent.

But the amazing thing is that about 15 minutes later, my children have already forgiven me. They nonviolently model the spiritual truth that James points to. When it comes parenting, we will make mistakes. But children remind us that parenting is not primarily about being good or bad. It’s about receiving their love and offering love in return. Ultimately, it’s about sharing the love of God with one another.

Because no matter how many times parents succeed or fail, love meets us where we are. It meets us in our joy and in our anger. And it invites us to relax and receive that love so that we may then share it with our children.