

# “Flywheel”

Mark 10:13-16 <sup>1</sup>

Some of you may remember that Elkana Chepsiror, our “Kenyan son,” lived with us for a year or so while he was in college. Elkana was a champion sprinter, and he was especially amazing in the 4 x 4 men’s relay. Elkana would always be the last runner, and whatever deficit the team might have accumulated by that point would be quickly erased as he blasted into hyperdrive to win the race.

Running a relay race is not as easy as it may look; and the most crucial moments in such races are the “handoffs,” as the baton passes from runner to runner within very strict guidelines. In the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, the American women’s team was favored to win the gold medal, relying heavily on Marion Jones, a sprinter who had won four gold medals at the previous games in Sydney, Australia.

The American team was already off to a strong start when Jones took the baton for the second leg of the race. She gained ground as she ran her 100 meters and approached Lauryn Williams, a young speedster who would run the third leg.

Williams began running as Jones drew near, but when she reached back to receive the baton, they couldn’t complete the handoff. Once, twice, three times Jones thrust the baton forward, but each time it missed William’s hand—she couldn’t seem to wrap her fingers around it. Finally, on the fourth try, they made the connection, but by that time, they’d crossed out of the 20-yard exchange zone and were disqualified.

Everyone knew they were the fastest team on the track. The night before, they’d had the fastest qualifying time. But when they couldn’t complete the handoff, their race was over. . . . There are two images, two metaphors, that I hope you will remember from this morning’s message, and the idea of “the handoff” is the first one.

Our text this morning is a familiar one having to do with Jesus and children. We’ve looked at what Jesus said about children quite recently (Mark 9:33-37), and I want to take our consideration of this morning’s text in a different direction. The idea on which I want to focus today is “bringing children to Jesus.”<sup>2</sup>

The first “handoff” I’d like to consider this morning has to do with how we handle our relationship with God in our homes. How does faith move from one generation to the next?

Paul described a handoff of this sort when he wrote to Timothy, “*I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also*” (2 Timothy 1:5). In that comment, Paul confirmed the handoff of personal faith over three generations. We don’t know whether Timothy’s mother or his grandmother was the first to believe in Jesus, or whether they both did at more or less the same time; but however it began, it’s clear that Paul saw evidence of faithfulness across all three of those generations. The “handoffs” were made, and made successfully.

It’s as true now as it was then that faith is more caught than taught. Our children have an unnerving ability to discern the moral values that really guide our lives. They watch us,

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on August 5, 2018. Parallel passages include: Matthew 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17.

<sup>2</sup> While this vignette is recorded in all three Synoptic Gospels, only Mark noted that Jesus was “indignant” at the disciples’ behavior, and only Mark recorded that Jesus did, in fact, bless the children. “*Let the children come to me!*” Jesus said. “*Don’t stop them, because the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.*”

and who we are is inescapable, no matter what we say. If you and I don't practice what we preach, our children may parrot our preaching, but they will copy our practice. That's how spiritual DNA really gets passed on to the next generation. Lois and Eunice didn't just "talk the talk." They "walked the walk" of faithfulness, and Timothy followed in their footsteps.

It's still true as we sit here this morning that we parents are the primary teachers of our children, for better or for worse, and whether we intend to be or not. In the formative years in which the die is cast, the twig bent, and the neurons connected, we parents have virtually unlimited opportunities to shape the lives, hearts, minds, and spirits of our children; and there is absolutely nothing more important for us to do.

As generations come and go, there always comes a point at which a handoff must be made in which the next generation receives the baton of faith and begins to run with it. And as many of you know, that handoff isn't as easy as it looks. It isn't automatic. It only comes as the result of thousands and thousands of practice runs.<sup>3</sup>

Now that's all well and good, but just how do we do that? Jill and I tried numerous methods of developing spiritual awareness in ourselves and in our children, most of which were only moderately effective. Perhaps you know what I mean.

Have you ever been frustrated with trying to express the depth and character of your faith to your children or to your grandchildren? With trying to communicate your sense of wonder along with the facts? When their faces don't light up with understanding? Let me offer a clue to what worked—and still works—for us.

Just for a moment, allow yourself to return in your imagination to the days when you were young. Was there a story that you loved to hear, over and over again? A tale in which you became completely immersed, and to which your daydreams often returned? If it was a truly great story, if you yielded to its mystery and power, you were changed.

More than this, its images are still imprinted in your mind, and in critical moments now you find that they come back to you, renewing a sense of ancient security and trust, and making sense of life's confusion over and over again. For many of us, *Winnie the Pooh* is such a tale . . . among many others.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were stories that were not only this powerful in their imaginative effect, but that could also open awareness to the unseen realities of faith, granting the gift of "*eyes that see and ears that hear*" as Jesus said (Matthew 13:15)? What a gift to give to our children!

I'm convinced that many such stories exist, but I want to highlight my favorites, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, by C. S. Lewis. I didn't discover these tales until adulthood, but they have enlivened and enriched my own experience of the transcendent beyond my ability to express it, and these stories have become the primary matrix in which Nathan, Anna and I talk about faith.

*Narnia* needs to be read aloud to achieve its full effect. I've told you before that Jill and I read all seven *Chronicles* to Nathan and Anna five times during their late childhood and pre-teen years, and it was indeed by that means that we were able to "bring our children to Jesus so that He might bless them." Many times in the years that followed, when Nathan or Anna

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Wilkerson, "From Generation to Generation," [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com).

asked about some spiritual reality, we could respond, “Do you remember when such-and-such happened in Book Three? This is like that.” And they both remembered and understood.<sup>4</sup>

The images conveyed through the “sanctified imagination” of Narnia are like the seeds Jesus of which spoke in the parable of the soils (Mark 4:1-20). When we read Narnia to our children, we’re scattering seeds, some of which will become implanted in our children’s minds. Some parts of the story will begin working in their conscious minds right away; others will set unconscious processes in motion.

Still others will need to rest for a long time, until our children’s minds have become ready for their germination, and some will not take root at all. But there will be times later when, in responding to a question about some relationship or event, we can say, “Do you remember when Jill and Eustace were in Underland and were longing for the Overworld, hardly daring to believe that it was real? This is like that.”

By reading stories such as Narnia to our children and to our grandchildren, we tell our children that we consider their inner experiences worthwhile, legitimate, and in a fundamental sense, real.<sup>5</sup> And it’s important to *read* the stories rather than to *watch* them.

A recent article in the *New York Times* reported research that suggest that reading to children—even to infants—is crucial for brain development. Researchers found that exposing children to a video or a picture short-circuited the children’s imagination. As one researcher put it, “They’re not having to imagine the story for themselves. It’s just being fed to them.”

Another researcher noted that children who were exposed to reading “showed significantly more activity in the areas of the brain that process visual association, even though the child was listening to a story and could not see any pictures.” The conclusion was that verbal communication makes the mind do the work of grasping and imagining the story for yourself. Images tend to feed us what someone else’s imagination has created.<sup>6</sup>

Remember that Jesus said, “*whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*” (Mark 10:15). So it is that the mysteries of the Kingdom of God often remain hidden from the learned while being transparently available to children.

Narnia provides the vivid images and sings the haunting songs of the spiritual journey, articulating what is virtually beyond words and enabling children and adults alike to become awake to God’s Spirit in this earthly realm.<sup>7</sup> As Aslan said to Lucy and Edmund before their final departure from Narnia,

“Dearest,” said Aslan very gently, “you and your brother will never come back to Narnia.”

“Oh, Aslan!” said Edmund and Lucy both together in despairing voices.

“You are too old, children,” said Aslan, “and you must begin to come close to your own world now.”

“It isn’t Narnia, you know,” sobbed Lucy. “It’s *you*. We shan’t meet *you* there. And how can we live, never meeting you?”

<sup>4</sup> We still have such conversations about Narnia, as Nathan and Anna are now reading them to their own children.

<sup>5</sup> E.L. Perera, “Reading Aloud: A Vanishing Commodity of Culture,” *Christianity Today*, 23 (June 8, 1979), pp. 63-64.

<sup>6</sup> <https://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/17/bedtime-stories-for-young-brains/>

<sup>7</sup> Edward Thornton, “A Story that Helps make Sense out of Life: Dante’s *Comedy*,” unpublished manuscript, p. 1.

“But you shall meet me, dear one,” said Aslan.

“Are—are you there too, Sir?” said Edmund.

“I am,” said Aslan, “*But there I have another name. You must learn to know me by that name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by knowing me here for a little, you may know me better there.*”<sup>8</sup>

Well, that’s a quick look at one of the ways we can “pass the baton” in our homes. I also want to think with you just a bit about “passing the baton” here at church and in our community.

It is no longer news that a significant percentage of our nation’s children are growing up without the benefit of having both of their parents in the home.<sup>9</sup> While 69% of children do still live with both parents, the number of children living with just their mom (23%) or just their dad (4%) has tripled over the last fifty years. The reasons for these changes are complex and not well understood, and it is not our business in the church to criticize these families. It’s our business to try to help them.

None of us can give to others what we ourselves have never received, so many children right here in Oakland Mills have never known the security of unconditional love. Kids are left to raise themselves, and the result of that is that they frequently make childish decisions that are bad for them, bad for their families, and bad for the community.

Children and youth who have never really experienced secure housing, secure nourishment, and secure love lack basic trust in life and have a fundamental distrust of the future. They become present-oriented, not future-oriented, because they are unable to imagine a future more hopeful than the bleak situations they presently know.

Accumulated mistrust, shame, doubt, and guilt cause youth to begin to shrink back from the challenges of achievement. Children who find themselves unable to demonstrate the competence necessary for success in life choose to settle for notoriety rather than recognition, and they become increasingly hopeless about their lives.<sup>10</sup>

Churches are sometimes reluctant to try to reach neighborhood youth whose lives are of this nature, because this work is hard work. Community youth ministry is expensive in time, talent, and treasure, and the results are sometimes hard to see.

Thankfully, our congregation has long been invested in such ministry, and we are now at the point of “levelling up” our ministry with community youth and their families as we call a new Associate Pastor for Youth and Community Ministry to lead us in “passing the baton” in Oakland Mills. This is an exciting time, and I want to share with you this morning’s second metaphor as an encouragement to “keep on keeping on.”

In his best-selling book, *Good to Great*,<sup>11</sup> Jim Collins has offered a powerful image of what it looks like to make those “thousands and thousands of practice runs” that lead to a good handoff of faith to the next generation: “Picture a huge, heavy flywheel” he says, “a massive metal disk mounted horizontally on an axle, about 30 feet in diameter, two feet thick,

<sup>8</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), pp. 215-216.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2016/cb16-192.html>

<sup>10</sup> Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 40, 44, 76.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap . . . and Others Don’t* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001).

and weighing about 5,000 pounds. Now imagine that your task is to get the flywheel rotating on the axle as fast and long as possible.

“Pushing with great effort, you get the flywheel to inch forward, moving almost imperceptibly at first. You keep pushing and, after two or three hours of persistent effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire turn.

“You keep pushing, and the flywheel begins to move a bit faster, and with continued great effort, you move it around a second rotation. You keep pushing in a consistent direction. Three turns . . . four . . . five . . . six . . . the flywheel builds up speed . . . seven . . . eight . . . you keep pushing . . . nine . . . ten . . . it builds momentum . . . eleven . . . twelve . . . moving faster with each turn . . . twenty . . . thirty . . . fifty . . . a hundred.

“Then, at some point . . . the momentum of the thing kicks in in your favor, hurling the great flywheel forward, turn after turn . . . its own heavy weight working for you. You’re pushing no harder than during the first rotation, but the flywheel goes faster and faster. Each turn of the flywheel builds upon work done earlier, compounding your investment of effort. A thousand times faster, then ten thousand, then a hundred thousand. The huge heavy disk flies forward, with almost unstoppable momentum.

“Now suppose someone came along and asked, ‘What was the one big push that caused this thing to go so fast?’ You wouldn’t be able to answer; it’s just a nonsensical question. Was it the first push? The second? The fifth? The hundredth? No! It was *all* of them added together in an overall accumulation of effort applied in a consistent direction.

“Some pushes may have been bigger than others, but any single heave—no matter how large—reflects a small fraction of the entire cumulative effect upon the flywheel. . . . There was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no wrenching revolution. Success comes about by a cumulative process—step by step, action by action, decision by decision, turn by turn of the flywheel—that adds up to sustained and spectacular results.”<sup>12</sup>

I think Collins’ image of the flywheel is a pretty good illustration of how we get to a good handoff in parenting and in youth ministry—by keeping on keeping on doing the fundamental things we know to do with all the excellence we can muster, with the help of God’s Spirit. We don’t get there all at once.

“If we diligently . . . continue to push in a consistent direction on the flywheel, accumulating momentum step by step and turn by turn, we will eventually reach breakthrough. It might not happen today, or tomorrow, or next week. It might not even happen next year. But it *will* happen.”<sup>13</sup>

Changing the world requires a long obedience in the same direction. **Keep pushing the flywheel, my friends. Keep pushing the wheel.**

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<sup>12</sup> Collins, pp. 164-165.

<sup>13</sup> Collins, pp. 184-185.