

Deuteronomy 6 for Us: Creeds, Stories and Practices

Deuteronomy 6:4-5: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

Do you know this passage? Does it sound familiar? It might...it is also echoed in the Gospels by Jesus.

Mark 12:28-34: And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’

Deuteronomy 6:4ff is called the **Shema** (*Shema* is transliterated from the Hebrew “to hear”). **It was the great Creed of the people of Israel.** What is a creed? It is a statement of faith. The *Shema* was the statement of faith of God’s people, confessed generation after generation. It tells of Who God is, and who the people are in relation to Him. More than that, it also speaks to how they are *to relate to God*. They are to love Him with their entire being. This creed precludes any allegiance to any other gods. It precludes a “divided” allegiance to the God of Israel. **There is One God and only Him they shall serve...and love with complete fidelity.**

We, of course, also have creeds—the Three Ecumenical Creeds—the Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian. The *Shema* is ours as well, and it is folded into the fullness of the revelation of the Triune God—One God but three Persons. The *Shema*’s demand still pertains *to our own fidelity*. But there is more to this. There is more than simply signing on to the faith. Confession of a creed is more than signing up for a membership to Costco. So, this is what we want to explore with this article: **how do our Creeds give us our stories...and how do our stories give us our practices.** To get at this question, we stay with *Deuteronomy 6* and look at how God directs His people to fully immerse themselves in His Story and then how that Story is told through practices.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9: And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

We start with “these words”. What words? The *Shema*! The very thing Moses has just told them to listen and pay attention to. But is this all? Certainly not. Because imbedded in “these words” is **Who God is and what He does.** God is their Creator. All things are made through Him, and anything that was made, He has made. He stands apart from His creation as the originator of it, but stands with it because He has created with love, precision and purpose. God is their

Redeemer. He has brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. This is what He has done for them—*set them free from bondage and given them new life*. He is also their Sanctifier. God has set them apart for Himself—a holy people, having been set free, are now to live in accordance with His design and purpose. They are now free for worship of God and service to their neighbor. **And all of this is constituted in a story**. This story has come to the fullest expression for us now in the work of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit.

The word “narrative” is overused in contemporary language. It’s everywhere—in politics and the culture wars and in self-discovery. Everyone talks about story! But the form of story is in fact, *how the Bible is given to us*. So, overused or not, we are given story as *a means of knowing who we are and Who God is*. As we see in *Deuteronomy 6*, the creed is a sort of “short-hand” for the story of God’s salvation His people. We want to consider this more, but first we turn to how the confession of the *Shema* is then to be practiced. In other words, **the story becomes embodied**.

Consider again what is commanded: *you shall teach them diligently to your children*. The underlying Hebrew verb (translated as “teach diligently”) is used elsewhere “to sharpen, or whet” an instrument or blade (*Deuteronomy 32:41*). To sharpen a knife, one must run the edge over a whetstone again and again. This is exactly the picture here. **To teach diligently through repetition**. More than that, the repetition is not merely in the classroom. The *Shema* (the creed and underlying story of God’s creating and saving work) is to be **practiced everywhere**. Sitting in the house; walking on your way; lying down and getting up. It is bound on the hands and placed before the eyes. It is written on the door of the house and even in the entry way to your property. What is the overwhelming picture of pedagogy? It is a *total immersion into the things of God in every physical location of the life of the child, centered around the home*. It is embedded and embodied in every single thing we do.

So, who does the teaching? Who does the *sharpening*? There are two entities bearing responsibility—the Church, namely the pastor and the parent, namely the father (more on that below). This *Shema* is not an individualistic enterprise, given to each household to implement according their own methods. Moses gives the *Shema* to the *corporate people of God, the Church*. **Pastors** are specifically called to deliver the Word and Sacrament to the people, and to “teach them to observe all that I have commanded you...” (Matthew 28:20). *The office of pastor is an office of teaching—all people, all seasons of life*. But practically speaking, what Moses says is directed to **parents**. For it is in the home where the faith is taught. This begs the question—what then is the relationship between the pastor and his people (parents) with respect to teaching the faith?

The pastor equips and trains others, that they might teach those to whom they are responsible for. Perhaps, you are single without a family. So, you are to be taught and learn to feed yourself! And the pastor will help you. But most of us have people we are responsible for either directly (parents) or indirectly (grandparents, godparents, neighbors, teachers, aunts, uncles, etc.). The pastor teaches his people that they may sharply teach the faith to others.

However, it is undeniable that what God has in view is **the household**. Hear how Moses presents the scenario of sharpening (6:20-25): *When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your son, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes. And he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land that he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as we are this day. And it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us.’*

Observe how this teaching is handed down—a **son asks a father**. Expanded out naturally, a daughter asks her mother. A grandchild asks his grandparent. But this responsibility starts with the head of the household and flows into other areas. The child asks the father, essentially the Small Catechism question, “What does all this mean?” So, what is the father to do? **He is to tell the story**. That story—this is what God has done for us. This is Who He is. This is who we are. And this is how we are to respond to His goodness and mercy. That mercy is the very heart of the Gospel—the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ alone. The Creed (the basic confession of faith) is told as a story, and that story is to be lived and practiced in a life of faith. This starts in the home.

The creed, story and practices are more than propositions. Part of the teaching to “do all this commandment” is *the modeling and inculcation of the goodness of God seen in the natural law*. God’s story is grounded in the truth of the world and how it works. It is the created goodness of man and woman (both their shared value and dignity and their distinctiveness), rightly-ordered human sexuality and marriage, virtues and piety, and so much more. It is to be taught but also lived in the home. For if a child does not see it, then it will be discounted. Indeed, for young children it is true that much more is “caught than taught” early on. But modeling is teaching! To quote Sting from his song, *All This Time*, “Father, if Jesus exists, then how come He never *lived here?*” Jesus has to live in the home, not just be talked about.

The Church, then, and the worship life of the congregation, **is the place where all of God’s people receive the gifts God gives to do this work**. The Church, built on the foundation of Christ, is the mouthpiece of the Creeds, and the teller of the stories. The Church is also the place where we learn through the embodied, ritual practices of the Liturgy. We practice the story every Sunday. Flowing from worship, and the reception of the means of grace, is the teaching that we are to deliver. The Small Catechism is a brilliant exposition of the essential teachings of the faith and a basic tool every head of household is to use. The quotation before every article of the Catechism: *as the head of the family should teach them in a simple way to the household*.

A basic response pastors get to teaching the faith to children is that we are to have a program, or an activity, or a “children’s message”...largely based on entertainment models. And those things

might have their place. **But not at the expense of what's done at home.** Things done at the congregational level (by the pastor, Sunday School, VBS) are to *complement and supplement what is taught day-in, day-out in the home*, the place where the child, “sits in their house...and where they lie down...and where they get up...and where they walk by the way.” We have had over the past 100 years in American Lutheran denominations *an abrogation of responsibility of parents and pastors not doing what they are supposed be doing*. In short, teaching, teaching, teaching. Congregations want the pastor to do everything but truly teach, and parents have a “drop-off” mentality. “Drop them off at church and let them learn about Jesus there!” Nothing done at home. Bare-minimum attendance in worship. Confirmation treated as a graduation ceremony. Boiling everything down to the lowest common denominator. Everything “kid-friendly”. The result of this is that children (and all of God’s people) view the teachings of the faith as expendable and that faith becomes something ones grows out of. These practices have been at play for decades and have retarded the spread of the Gospel. As a result, generations of children have left the Church, never to return. So, what are we to do? *We instead are to give them something to grow into.*

Your question may be, “How do I actually do this? You don’t know my life pastor! Or the lives of my grandchildren! You don’t know how busy, and crazy, and chaotic, and stressful, and messy the lives of people are!” I do know. Quite well. And over the last 230 weeks I have written, spoken, pleaded, prayed, recorded audio postcards and developed a myriad of tools, resources, approaches to aid and encourage. There are several things on the website *right now* to start the conversation. *What I have not had is one single person ask for help or guidance.* Not one. That concerns me. Because I can’t make someone want to do any of this. I get the feeling that people view me as extraneous and *not* someone to look to for matters of faith and practice...but will blame me if things aren’t going well.

But what is so instructive is that God, in His manifold wisdom, **has given us a real, concrete embodied approach to catechize our families in the faith.** We see it in *Deuteronomy 6*. There is a creed, a story, and a practice. How all of that is applied and lived out in 21st century is a challenge, but one thing is clear—**we must do it.** The thing people have asked me about is where the children go after confirmation. So, there is an awareness of the problem, but there is no magic bullet. The answer is hard, intentional work...every day. But in part, the straight forward answer—**we aren’t living the faith the way we see in Deuteronomy 6.** We all bear responsibility for this. It’s time to get busy.

So, where do we go from here? What do I propose to help beyond what I have already done or am doing? Two things. First, if any family is willing, they are invited to come to my home for dinner and **participate in a substantial home devotion.** It will be fun and instructive, and I can show you first-hand how one might teach the faith at home, centered around the family table. I extend this to all families in the congregation, whether you currently have children, are wanting to start a family (these two groups are given priority), as well as those who are grandparents and want to encourage their sons and daughters in their home life. I will show you a way to do it, in a

positive way and give you something you can practice the next meal time. All you have to do is approach me with a willingness to learn. Ask for an invitation.

I also propose to **hold four “town hall” meetings during the year on various topics that touch on teaching the faith.** Some of the topics will be: the challenge of using technology and social media platforms, proper social engagement in the Body of Christ (so, dating), the beauty of memorization and narration in the home, men and women roles in the Church, the way the Liturgy teaches the faith, and many others. *These are open to entire congregation.* They will likely be held on Sunday after worship, and will include a meal and a parallel activity for the children while the town hall is being conducted. Each session will be no more than 45 minutes. I will have a substantial teaching, but there will be time for interaction, Q and A, etc. So, worship, lunch, interactive town hall, home no later than 2pm.

Please take to heart what God gives us in the *Shema*. Listen to Moses’s words. God’s manifold wisdom is given to all in the very way He created us. We are to embrace His methods. For even within the structure of home catechesis and a life of worship in the Church is great variety. But there are constants. There is an order, a structure, an embodied approach. Let’s discover what that is and what that might look like for every single person in this congregation.