

There's a saying that rings true for all parents: Having a child is like having your heart walking around outside of your body. As any parent knows, the process of raising a child is filled with emotions – uncertainties - joys - and sorrows. Whether you're a parent, expectant parent or grandparent, there is an endless well of comfort, advice, and quotes about gratitude to be found in the Bible. After all, we are all children of God, so it's no surprise His Word is full of parenting wisdom and understanding, when it comes to unconditional love – as well as the worrying, discipline, and second-guessing that goes into caring for another human being.

I read a story of a little boy named Billy who was taking to his mother after church...He said, "my Sunday School teacher told me that God is everywhere, is that true?" His mother said, "that's right Billy"... He went on and said, "Is God up in the sky?"...And his mom said, "yes, I'm sure He is".... Then Billy asked, "Is God in my belly?" Now mom wasn't quite sure where all this was going... And she didn't quite know how to answer him... So, she said, "well, I'm not sure, but I guess He is"... Billy thought for a moment...and then said, "Mommy, God wants a cookie".

So, what does the New Testament say about nourishing His children? We know the principal sources of spiritual food: prayer, studying the scriptures, attending inspirational gatherings, singing the hymns, serving in our callings, partaking of the sacrament, and making other covenants. Just as we need nourishing food to survive physically, we need the Bible to survive spiritually. Our souls are nourished by whatever speaks of Christ and leads us to Him, whether it is written in the scriptures, or taught by other humble servants of God.

John 6:35 – *"Then Jesus declared, 'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.'"* While this verse is certainly speaking of spiritual hunger and thirst, it is also about physical bread. Jesus is speaking of a heavenly mystery stemming back to the story in Exodus and the miracle of God's provision in the desert. The physical hunger of people has always mattered to God. And it is God who always provides.

Matthew 25:35-37 reads: *'For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me.'* Jesus links feeding the hungry to ministering to others. Caring for vulnerable, hungry people is not only following Jesus' lead, but also the same caring for Jesus.

Just as a plant without water will die, faith without action will die. We must constantly nourish our faith through righteous works. As God nourishing our bodies and souls through an abundance of love, He calls us to care for and feed others in the same compassionate spirit. We see this compassion all around us.

We nourish the fiber of our church in recognized and unrecognized ways...

- One is bringing families together to worship God in this place.
 - Developing deep friendships within our church family
 - Contributing to the life of our church as deacons, elders, and mentors.
 - Being there for each other as we face the joys and challenges of each stage of our lives.

- 2nd is encouraging our youth in their spiritual journey. –
 - Just like many of you, Dave and I were blessed to be Sunday School teachers for many of your children during their junior and high school years. We enjoyed watching them mature and grow spiritually... to get married, have children and begin to nurture their own kids in their spiritual journey.
 - Many of our have impacted our church family as teachers, tutors, volunteers, confirmation class leaders, youth leaders, vacation bible school participants and more

In Matthew 7:9-10, Jesus talks about God's care for us by using the example of how parents care for their children. He asks his disciples, "Is there any among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will you give a snake?"

- We nourish the fiber of our Christian impact in the world through missions... by providing for those in need and less fortunate. Our church has a big heart for missions, and shares God's

love in many ways, locally, regionally, and internationally. Our mission's ministry is committed to ensure the impact of your support is making a difference. This impact is clear

- Locally, we support several youth initiatives. Leah Lyerly's "Love Box" helps provide needed items to our community through your support. Leah's impact continues to grow and meet the need of more and more people. We have had the Boy Scout program at Cook's for 68 years. They have had numerous projects over the years included the flagpole, Paul Love's volleyball court with benches, Chris Brady's picnic tables, Ryan Mitchell's brick sidewalk at the playground, and Eric Thompson's signs and benches for the community garden. A current scout will be re-stripping the parking lot soon, and each year they hold food drives for Loaves and Fishes. It's a wonderful way to nourish the boys in a Christian environment.

- A Cook's member was instrumental in the creation of Lily Pad Haven, a regional non-profit that addressed the effects of human trafficking by providing safe shelter to survivors. Cook's supported these efforts in many ways until last year when they became part of Hope for Justice NC Regional Center.

- Cook's continues to make a difference on the global stage since 2008. Hope For Kajiado was founded by members of Cook's mission ministry and we have been blessed to witness God's hand at work in providing physical and spiritual nourishment for these vulnerable children. We have led 14 mission trips to Kenya to date and provided hundreds of kids with your donations of shoes, clothing, small toys, and school supplies. Together, we impact not only their physical care. They also receive spiritual nourishment by growing up in a Christian environment and nurturing a personal relationship with their "American parents" as they receive letters of encouragement. 13 kids are currently being sponsored by Cook's members, and almost 40 additional kids are supported by friends of members. We have many faith stories from our visits to KCH. I'd like to share just one story that shows the profound impact of God's nourishment through us.

We met Ikonet on our very first mission trip in 2010. She had just come the week before our arrival. She was 4 years old, malnourished with the extended belly and scared. She had lost both parents to HIV/AIDS and had no family to care for her, so you could understand why our efforts to make her smile were met with wounded eyes. However, she started to sit near Ella Hollar after a day or so. Ikonet didn't know English of course, but Ella would talk with her, and she showed her love and patience. By the end of the week Ikonet smiled for us. Each year after that, Ikonet was one of the first children to meet our bus when we visited. We spent time each day with her, and she began to open up as her English improved. She seemed to crave our attention as she was always nearby. She also cried when we left. Well actually, we all cried when we left. As time passed, she talked more and more about how thankful she was that God saved her by coming to KCH. For 3 years, we took shoes from Samaritan's Feet and held feet washings at the home. How wonderful it was to share our faith story with the kids and tell them how much Jesus loved them. When she was ten years old, I took 24 students from UNCC to KCH for their spring break. My bunkmate was a girl named Carly who complained about everything. She couldn't understand why the kids couldn't select their own shoe styles rather than having ones selected for them. (We had tagged each pair of shoes with the child's name to ensure we had shoes for everyone.) She couldn't understand why we couldn't distribute all the clothes we brought so the kids could fill their dorm rooms with clothing, instead of storing clothes in the clothing closet and distributed by the matron as needed. She couldn't understand why the kids had to wash their own clothes or do chores around the campus. Each day, she had something else that "wasn't fair". When the day came for the feet washing, Carly told me she was going to make a "big impact" on a child when she shared her faith story. I had paired her with Ikonet, and afterwards Cindy came to me crying "it's not fair, it's not fair". I said, "OK, what's not fair?" and in tears, she said, "because I was supposed to minister to this child, and instead she ministered to me!". Cindy said Ikonet had told her what she had been through and how her faith had been the one thing she could always count on. That she read her Bible and prayed every day that God would provide her next meal and continued protection; that she was thankful for His loving care because she knew that He would always provide if she believed in Him". Cindy was heavily impacted by this and had no more complaints for the rest of our stay. Knowing Ikonet and seeing the change in Carly, I thanked God that Carly was open to Ikonet's testimony. The following year, we didn't take shoes, and when we arrived, Ikonet came running asking "Did you bring shoes, did you bring shoes?!" I explained that

we couldn't bring shoes this year. And she responded, "That's ok, I took my shoes to my village, and I washed my cousin's feet, and told her about Jesus". This took my breath away, and I realized then why God has put this home on our hearts. That we weren't only providing physical and spiritual nourishment, but building His church, one child at a time. I looked up and thanked God for putting Ikonet and the rest of these children in our lives.

Shall we Pray?

God – open our hearts to nourish Your children around us and abroad. Help us to provide the unconditional love You have shown to us. Give us the words and show us the way to provide spiritual nourishment to our children here in the US, as well as the children of Kenya, so that they can grow into Christians who will influence their homes and their community. Thank you for Your guidance and protection as we plant the seeds of hope, and please God, speak to the hearts of those who hear us. Bless the members of Cook's Church as they provide for our work in missions locally, regionally, and abroad. And thank you Gracious God, for nourishing our bodies and souls through the abundance of your love. Help us to care for and feed others in the same compassionate spirit. For the earth is yours and the fullness thereof, and in your presence, there is no lack. Amen.