

Training in Christianity: Holy habits

by [Ellen T. Charry](#) in the [April 18, 2001](#) issue

Eleven-year-old Jennifer has invited her friend Claire to spend the day. Jennifer's younger sister, Laurie, who is eight, is trying to keep up with the older girls. None of them has any interest in Claire's six-year-old brother, Michael, who is staying with them for about 15 minutes. As the three girls head downstairs, with the older ones leading the way, Laurie turns to Michael and says, "I'm going to tear your hair out by the roots." Michael looks glum and says, "She hates me."

The social dynamics here are fairly easy to figure out. Laurie idolizes Jennifer, and wants to be one of the big girls. Hence she puts as much distance as possible between herself and the little brother. He is the untouchable in the caste system the girls have erected. Jennifer, for her part, likes bossing Laurie around, and she is not willing to share Claire with her younger sister. Laurie, feeling the threat of exclusion, joins the older girls in excluding Michael. Claire, meanwhile, is more interested in her friendship with Jennifer than in the plight of her little brother.

The challenge of raising children to be kind arises repeatedly for parents in everyday situations like this one. Children are often cruel to one another. It is normal, of course, for children to make exclusive friendships—it is one way they learn to make decisions and relate to people other than family members. The issue for parents and other adults is how to make childhood, with its usual amount of mean-spiritedness, a training ground for Christian living.

Scolding and punishments are important, though not necessarily immediately effective. They can also be overused or badly done, causing problems between parent and child. Parents need additional tools. I think Christians need to be much more intentional about adopting rituals and habits that embody the Christian life and that can create a gracious climate in which children and adolescents can flourish, even as they grow into Christian self-awareness.

One habit is that of holy silence. As Jennifer and Laurie were beginning to discover, the tongue is a sharp instrument. When I was little, my mother drummed into my head, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything." The psalmist advises,

“Guard your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking guile” (34:13), and the Jewish prayerbook continues, “and to those who slander me let me give no heed.” Practicing holy silence is a great feat of strength. It is also a way of protecting other people from us, and us from later embarrassment when our ill-spokenness stands revealed.

Holy silence has three aspects. One is simply holding one’s tongue. Another is to replace the sharp words with words of encouragement or at least something neutral. A third form of silence is simply to withdraw from the fray. Quakers have institutionalized this practice by encouraging individuals to join in silence even in the heat of argument as a way of building a bond of unity in the midst of controversy. It is not exactly a time-out, but an opportunity to reflect on what is happening and change the dynamic.

Teaching children the habit of holy silence is a way of teaching them how to glorify God with their mind and body. They can protect themselves and respect others simply by being quiet. And learning the habit of silence teaches the skill of listening, of being present with someone in need.

A second habit to learn is that of holy friendship. Aelred of Rievaulx, a medieval monk, put a Christian spin on friendship by arguing that holy friendship derives from our relationship to God. He offered this summary of the qualities of a friend: “Loyalty, right intention, discretion, and patience, that you may entrust yourself to him securely . . . The right intention, that he may expect nothing from your friendship except God and its natural good. Discretion, that he may understand what is to be done in behalf of a friend, what is to be sought from a friend, what sufferings are to be endured for his sake, upon what good deeds he is to be congratulated; and, since we think that a friend should sometimes be corrected, he must know for what faults this should be done, as well as the manner, the time and the place. Finally, patience, that he may not grieve when rebuked, or despise or hate the one inflicting the rebuke, and that he may not be unwilling to bear every adversity for the sake of his friend.”

The family is perhaps the best venue for helping children grow in understanding how to care for others through holy friendship. How family members treat each other becomes a template for other relationships, for good as well as for ill. Cultivating holy speaking and spiritual caring within the family is challenging, precisely because the intimacy there weakens the natural caution that accompanies less familiar

relationships. I remember having to correct my teenage daughter at a time when she was being rude and hurtful to other members of the family. She thought she could say and do anything at home. She herself admitted, when confronted, that she thought she could “be natural” and “be herself” at home. It was a lightbulb moment when she realized that table manners apply at home too.

As children move into adolescence, the peer group overtakes the family in its authority. Laurie reacted as she did because her sister, who did not want Laurie to intrude on her time with Claire, had excluded her. Laurie, feeling shut out, did to Michael what was being done to her. Jennifer failed to befriend her sister and provided a negative model that her sister promptly imitated.

Jennifer should have been willing to suffer the loss of some of Claire’s attention for the sake of her sister, and without prompting. Claire proved to be no stronger in her friendship to her brother than was Jennifer to her sister. Claire did nothing to protect her brother, even though he was going to be with them for only 15 minutes, and she was going to be with Jennifer the whole day.

Another aspect of this situation is Claire’s friendship with Jennifer. Had she included her brother, it would have constituted a subtle challenge to Jennifer’s control of the situation and a subtle rebuke to her friend. Holy friendship would dictate that Jennifer receive this rebuke without bitterness. In Aelred’s terms, this sequence of sacrifice and rebuke is essential to holy friendship.

Some may say that 11-year-old children cannot be expected to achieve this level of maturity in their friendships. Then the questions arise: When is it appropriate to begin expecting mature judgments from children? How will children learn about the practice of friendship and the importance of Christian charity if they do not learn in their early years? Today 11-year-olds are allowed to act like adults in a shocking number of ways. It would be hypocritical of us not to inculcate mature behavior to go along with adult freedoms.

Even with careful guidance and training, it is difficult to become as self-observant and gracious as the psalmist and Aelred recommend. There is, however, a symbolic Christian ritual that concretizes and acts out the foundation of such maturity that can be used even with young children—the ritual of foot washing. Having one’s feet washed is an intimate and in some ways unsettling act. At the same time, washing another’s feet is an ennobling and empowering sacred act of responsibility and care.

The power to understand symbols seems to be disappearing. Symbolic acts like pledging allegiance to the flag, or shaking hands, remain important not for the performance but for the attitudes and virtues toward which they bend the participant. When the larger framework of responsibility and trust that these acts carry is lost, these rituals become empty. But abandoning these rituals means forfeiting an opportunity to act out the skills and virtues required of citizens (in the one case) and of mutually respectful acquaintances (in the other).

What if families or church school classes were to practice foot washing, preceded by proper instruction in Christian service and accompanied by psalms and a short liturgical blessing of each person in service to the others? What if children were to celebrate their baptismal birthdays by washing the feet of their friends?

It might seem unlikely that children would take this ritual seriously. But if children become accustomed to washing one another's feet, a prayerful atmosphere in a family or church school setting would not be foreign to them. If the ritual were explained properly, they would then at least have the category of friendship and service available to them amid the complex social pressures they will face.

Of course, symbolic rituals themselves are insufficient to form children in service to others. They must practice actually doing it. Nine-year-old Alex got a chance to practice it recently with his friend Christopher. Alex comes from a stable family, while Christopher has a very hard life—his father has died and his mother has left him in the care of his grandmother, who is rather poor. He is far down in the childhood caste system. Alex is one of his only friends, and even Alex is hesitant to play with him when the other children are around. On Christopher's birthday, all his Pokémon cards were stolen. When Alex's mother learned about this, she asked Alex to draw from his own large collection of Pokémon cards several to give to Christopher as a gift and a replacement. This simple act illustrates the way that the doctrine of foot washing can become real to children.

This alert mother was leading her son in the practice of Christian charity. From her repeated attention to opportunities for Alex to serve his friends and neighbors, Alex will learn habits of kindness. Adding the ritual of foot washing would give him a language for service and help him locate it in a long tradition of Christian practice. It would enable him to experience neighbor-love as a way of life.

Practices and rituals of this sort run counter to much of today's youth culture. They must be introduced, explained and reinforced by wise adults who can skillfully

interpret the incidents and escapades that children daily experience in terms of them and the commitments they symbolize. Children need such practices and rituals, and more important, such understanding if they are to learn to glorify God with their bodies, minds and spirits.