

# Caring Conversations

*I have called you by name, you are mine. Isaiah 43:1*

**GEORGE WAS** a precious and precocious five-year old, when his Sunday school teacher asked the class, “How do you know you are loved?”

Without skipping a beat, George responded, “By the sound of my name in your throat!”

This is what the writer of Isaiah announces for God. God calls us by name and claims us. So how can we show God’s love and care for the children in our midst?

The whole point of parenting your child of God is to express unconditional love. Not, “I love you, when . . .” Just simply, “I love you.” This is the love God rains down on us in Jesus. There are no conditions or no terms. We cannot earn or deserve it.

The apostle Paul reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God we know in Jesus Christ: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor

things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

The greatest gift you can give children is to love them unconditionally. Why? When children know that they are loved and secure, they are able to use their life energy to care for and about others. When love is conditional, based on behavior and accomplishments, the price children pay is huge.

## WHERE TO BEGIN

How do you begin to tackle this daunting task of parenting faithfully? Begin with caring conversations, where all relationships begin.

Think back to your childhood. With whom did you have caring conversations as a very young child? How did those conversations happen? Where were you?

Many of us remember being nestled in a parent's arms, held on a lap, or playing with a parent on the floor while having a caring conversation.

For those of us who did not experience this, we longed for it. We sought it elsewhere and resolved to provide this kind of experience for any child we would parent. Some of the most nurturing parents I have ever known have provided this sanctuary for their children, despite never knowing it first hand. What a miraculous transformation this is for the parent as well as for the child.

David Anderson, pastor, scholar, father, and colleague of mine, wrote his doctoral dissertation on Lutheran spirituality in the home, emphasizing the importance of what goes on in the home, not only in the congregation. It was Anderson who named the Four Keys for Nurturing Faith, identifying them in scripture, in research on faith formation, and in the experience of God's faithful people.

Caring conversations are the floor under close relationships and certainly the floor under family life. They are the way we know one another and are known to one another. Caring conversations are one powerful way we model and transmit Christian values and faith to the next generation. Caring conversations help children experience the love of God. They are about being present: listening deeply, respectfully, and with great care; speaking with love and gentleness; and being empathetic. Responding to the daily concerns, delights, and insights of our children gives us their trust and invites them to express God's love to others. This is how God's love is passed on.

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Begin that lifelong, loving conversation the first time you see your child, whether your child arrives by birth or adoption. Call your child by name. Tell your child he or she is beloved. Thank God for him or her. Beam. Coo. Snuggle. Caress. Sing. Some of your caring conversation will use words—some won't.

Actually, the conversation may begin before birth. A grandmother in Portland, Oregon shared this story. The first time she saw her grandson was in the birthing room, and he was less than an hour old. As she stood staring down at this precious baby, her son, Matt, called across the room to her. That one-hour old baby turned instantly in the direction of his father's voice, a voice he had heard before he was born. "I have called you by name" indeed!

The rational among us claim that it doesn't matter what we say, because babies can't understand the words we use. What every baby understands is the loving connection created by the sounds parents make. Babies need to hear language to acquire it. From tone of voice, they hear love expressed. They are comforted and soothed. Jesus told his followers that the sheep hear