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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life. Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.
I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.
I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life, because it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.
Today we're discussing family discipleship.
How do parents raise children that are strong in their Christian faith?
Here to discuss it are Dr. Mart Thompson and Dr. Todd Biermann.
Dr. Mart Thompson is Associate Professor of Practical Theology and Director of the Specific Ministry Pastor Program here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.
He is the Director of the Family Discipleship Initiative in partnership with the Concordia Center for the Family.
Dr. Thompson joined our faculty in 2016.
He earned his MDiv and Doctor of Ministry here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis and has years of experience as a parish pastor and campus pastor.
He is currently working on a book about family discipleship, which will be published next year.
Dr. Thompson, welcome to the show.

Mart: Thank you, Jessica.
It's great to be here.
I love the show.
And so does my wife.
By the way, I just noticed on her coffee mug, she has a tangible podcast sticker already on that mug.

Jessica: Wonderful.
I love it.
Listeners, if you want one of our stickers, just send me an email.
I'll send you one too.
Joining the conversation is Dr. Todd Biermann.
Dr. Biermann is the Executive Director of Concordia Center for the Family.
CCF is a recognized service organization of the LCMS, whose mission is to unite homes and congregations and making lifelong disciples of Jesus.
Dr. Biermann earned his Master's of Divinity here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis and his Doctor of Ministry at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne.
He has years of experience as a parish pastor and international ministry with his wife, Heather.
Dr. Biermann, we're glad to have you on the show while you are in town today.

Todd: It's a great joy to be with you and with Dr. Thompson and with you, Jessica, as coming back to my home.
I love Concordia Seminary and even have family ties here.
Some of you might know my brother, Joel, and I get to see him occasionally around here.

Usually we don't even see each other when I'm on campus, but it's good to be here with all of you.

Jessica: All right, Dr. Thompson, what motivated your interest in family discipleship?

Mart: That's a great question.
Actually, it was the desire to raise our own children in the faith.
You mentioned this book that I've been working on, which follows kind of the narrative of our lives, Cheryl and my life in raising our children in the faith and then in working in congregations where I was helping homes do the same for their children. So that has kind of driven my desire and interest in this over the years and is why, you know, we're talking today.

Jessica: And what about you, Dr. Biermann?
It stems back to growing up in a household where my dad, a LCMS pastor, was a great example of family ministry as well. He and my mom, I respected them tremendously for raising my brothers and I in the faith. And I learned a lot from them of what a family should look like. And I assumed that everybody had that. But then I realized that's not the case. And it drove me to a desire to have others experience the blessing of a Christian family the way I had experienced it. And that every family could have a walk with the Lord that's just part of every day of life. Because that's what's really needed here is where disciples of Jesus are growing with the Lord every day, not just one day a week, but all the time, because the Lord wants to bless us every day. And that's my desire is for every family to have his blessings every day.

Jessica: So I've heard the term family discipleship.

Todd: Yes.

Jessica: Can you unpack that?
What does that mean?

Mart: Sure.
Well, we have a definition that we've agreed upon. And Dr. Biermann was very instrumental in crafting that. And I spoke into it. And this definition of family discipleship has kind of been accepted in the Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod as a standard definition. And it's this, Christ's gifts, nurturing faith in God's children through the partnership of home and congregation. As you just heard Dr. Biermann speak, what Concordia Center for the Family and what we're trying to do here at Concordia Seminary is to emphasize this partnership of the home and congregation, but we center it all in the gifts of Christ. And that makes it somewhat unique in the in the world of family ministry and broader Christendom. And it captures our distinctively, I think, Lutheran emphases in ministry.

So that's what family discipleship is.

Starting off by referencing the gifts of Christ at the beginning of the definition, which says that everything we're doing is focused on how we have been recreated in Christ. So, for example, in a home, you know, things don't always run smoothly because we're sinners.

And in our lives, we find challenges and struggles.

And while God designed us and created us to live a certain way and gave us his law as a guide for how to live our lives, gave a guide to parents on how to raise their children.

In this broken world in which we live, oftentimes we have to look to Christ and his gifts of forgiveness and life and salvation to restore and renew us.

And the nice thing is, is that helps equip parents, gives them confidence, but it also models for their children what it's like to be a Christian, to live at the receiving end of the mercy and forgiveness that Christ earned for us on the cross and with his resurrection.

So that is a major emphasis in what we do.

And you won't see that represented broadly in that way in other family discipleship literature.

Jessica: Dr. Biermann, tell me how family discipleship is part of Concordia Center for the family and what you do.

Todd: Our real emphasis is to partner with other entities that are helping the family, such as what Dr. Thompson's doing to shape up future church workers so they can go out and share the message of family discipleship.

We have the special role though of supporting pastors and church workers in the field to help them see the value of family discipleship and to give them training and resources, such as the resource of a survey tool that we provide, the Faith in Life Survey, where they can assess where their congregation is currently about serving the families that are around them and then where they could go into the future.

And that's a robust tool that congregations can use, church workers can use, to assess their members where the people all respond anonymously.

On our website, we have a number of resources that we provide, most of them free.

We also link to a lot of other resources that are available, such as through what Dr. Thompson's doing and through our partners at the International Center of the LCMS.

We provide links to those resources, but especially to shift mindsets towards the concept of family discipleship.

And we do that not by asking congregations to throw out what you're doing, but to take your existing programming and activities and tweak them a little bit so they go into the home, where you also gather around in the flesh with one another in a tangible way every day.

There you go, tangible.

That tangible aspect of faith that families can comprehend.

Mart: Well, let me tell you a little bit about the Family Discipleship Initiative.

This is part of a larger movement in the Christian Church, funded by the Lilly Endowment, who's invested millions and millions of dollars into trying to help churches and church bodies and theological institutions do a better job of raising children in the faith in today's cultural landscape, where we find it often very difficult to do.

And the grant that we applied for and were given called for both the seminary along with Concordia Center for the Family to actually work together in trying to help influence the Lutheran Church of Missouri Synod, church workers, seminary students, congregations, parents, and lay people, and moving in the direction of more of this family discipleship that we talked about.

This partnership of the church in the home, raising children in the faith using the gifts of Christ.

What's unique about our grant is that it focuses on both seminary and church and congregation.

So at the seminary, we form pastors and deaconesses to go out and serve in parishes. And in the church at large.

And so, as we do that, we want to help them in their own lives be formed in how to effectively raise their children in the faith, how to share the gifts of Christ in their own homes, and also how to lead their congregations and the homes in their various churches to do the same thing in this partnership with the ministry of the congregation.

So there are ways that we can help influence that in our teaching the faith curriculum here at the seminary, in pastoral theology classes, those kinds of classes, and also ways that we through our formation labs that work with students in their daily lives and developing their own habits and priorities, and in their congregations. We work with the families in transition group that works with students and their homes and families while they're here at the seminary.

And I'll let Dr. Biermann kind of elaborate on some of the things that they do in Concordia Center for the family's work.

Todd: Sure.

We do dovetail very closely with what Dr. Thompson's doing here at the seminary. I see him as the one who's paving the way for the future of the church as they're raising up church workers, pastors, deaconesses to understand the concept of family discipleship, to live it themselves, and pass it along.

Our job is to shift those who are already in the field to the same mindset.

So those partners, that tool of the survey assessment, and our training facilitators, we call them, really help us to dovetail with the seminary.

Mart: And one of the things that I think brought this partnership about was that I know Concordia Center for the family, which has been around for quite a while, had been doing a number of those kind of things in the past.

And what they discovered was that if the pastors were not on board, if they did not kind of have this vision of what family discipleship is, then you can provide all the training and resources in the world.

And if the pastor is not on board, or the senior pastor in the congregation is not supportive of it, then it doesn't really move forward.

So by having the seminary forming pastors with this mindset, and then Concordia Center for the Family working with other entities within the LCMS, we have good partnerships, don't we, Todd, over at the International Center with Andy Becker and the Office of National Mission and Dan Galshut over there, as well as Concordia Publishing House.

Then together, we kind of form what I think of as a movement today for family discipleship in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod to help raise children in the faith.

And that's something we really need, Jessica.

And if you'd like, I can explain some of why I think that's so important today.

Jessica: Go for it.

Mart: All right.

Well, thank you.

In 2017, the LCMS Department of Youth Ministry did a pretty comprehensive study of our congregations and youth, a young adult study is what it was called, of millennials, I think, at the time.

And it showed what pretty much statistics and research from everywhere else in Christendom was showing.

And that was that the number of children that were remaining active in young adulthood in the Christian faith was somewhere around 20 to 30 percent of...

So, in other words, there was a book years ago that came out called *You Lost Me*, talking about how a lot of young people kind of have fallen away from the faith.

And it's reflected in the survey data across the board, including our own Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

And it doesn't mean that we were not trying hard.

We have been, but a lot of that has been centered just in the congregation.

And so, what this family discipleship movement and emphasizing this partnership is focusing on the home and the resources that Dr. Biermann and Concordia Center for the Family provide, the way we're trying to form pastors and deaconesses here, is to show how the home is so important and how the congregation can support the home in that work.

Jessica: In what ways would parents who are listening, many of our listeners are parents, in what ways would they take this information and apply it in their family? So, right now, you've described the theory of it, described some different resources, and the research, really, that has influenced it. But I'm a parent just listening, and I want to know more about how I can do it, and what's my role in this.

Mart: Okay, that's a great question.

Well, first of all, we need to help you grow in your own faith.

What we found is that raising up parents in their own relationship with God and Christ and the promise of their own baptisms, finding hope in Jesus, Jesus, it strengthens them to carry out this calling.

Well, one of the most important ways you equip parents is just strengthening them in their own faith, encouraging them to be at Bible class that feeds them, encourage them to participate in the kinds of activities Concordia Center for the family teaches congregations to provide in parenting guidance for how to do things in your home that are part of the natural course of the day, but they are done with an emphasis on Christ.

To have just a time set aside daily for prayer and devotions is crucial.

And we have some simple, formative kind of devotions that any home can really do that will have a tremendous impact on their on their children, their children's relationship with God and their relationships with one another.

So that's one example.

I don't know, Todd, do you have some other suggestions of what homes can do?

Todd: I think a very important term is the concept of habits in the household that promote daily focus on the Lord. There's a book we often reference, Justin Whitmore Early's book, Habits of the Household, is a great book that lays down this concept of habits in the household that raise up Christian discipleship in the home. And we build on that same concept in establishing those ideas that our faith is to grow a little bit every day. And it can't just be one thing I do once a week or once a month. It has to be a little bit every day. That's where I come in with my concepts of those simple illustrations that can stick in your head every day. My thumbs up illustration I use of Christ is first in my life. Thumbs up to him. He flows into me the palm of the hand and out to the people that I love in my home. My wife is number one, my children and family members, my church family, and then the world. That's a little illustration that they take home every day and can use in a habitual way. And I explain that when I do training with folks.

Jessica: In what ways do you see the cradle-to-grave ministry of directors of Christian education equipping parents to do this?

Mart: That is a great question. The directors of Christian education, or sometimes we call them DCEs, along with maybe pastors that are focused on youth ministry, really the kinds of things that they already do are so important in life. Leading youth Bible studies, taking youth on mission trips, and providing for just kind of that personal relationship, say, with a high schooler that maybe they don't want to talk with their parents about something, but they'll talk to their youth counselor about. Those kinds of activities, which we've, I think, done a pretty good job of in our church body, need to continue happening. The changes are helping the... having the DCEs and the pastors and the ministry of the congregation recognize that this has to be a partnership with the home. Now, where the parents don't do it, the church does have to come around those children and try to provide for that. That is definitely needed. But there are so many places where the home could be doing it and it's not. On the other hand, we don't want to turn parents into surrogate DCEs or surrogate pastors. They have their role to play as well. And so that's where this partnership concept is so important in this.

Jessica: I've noticed that the DCEs and congregations that I've been a part of have been really key in equipping parents to know how to do that. Not all of my friends who have kids, they didn't have examples of what it should be like. So then where do they start?

You know, they start with the family of their church to equip them.
And that has been powerful for me to see the ways that DCEs and youth workers not only minister to youth, but help parents know how to do it.
How do I have conversations at home?

Todd: Yeah, that is great.

Mart: That's exactly what we're looking for.
And that's what we hear DCEs saying that they need.
They need the ministry of the congregation to put this emphasis on the home to work with them.
There was a nice book that came out of the Office of Youth Ministry recently on, I think, Seven Habits of Healthy Youth Ministry.
I'm paraphrasing.
That's not the exact title.
Do you remember the exact title, Todd?

Todd: Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry.

Mart: Yeah, Seven Practices of Healthy Youth Ministry.
Right.
And one of those really focused nicely on the practice of engaging the home and equipping the home.
And in there, there was a description of how they so much need the home to do this, to partner with them.
Now you both said that you have families at home, and your children are moved out of the house.

Jessica: So as you think back to your parenting of your children, what was one area of faith development or a family discipleship in your home that you really struggled with?
And then how did you work through that challenge?
What was helpful to you?
And I want you both to answer that one.
That's a good question.

Todd: Well, I can say that the struggles in my own household as a parish pastor was the time to focus on my family.
They usually received the leftovers.
And I would squeeze them in wherever.
What I had to learn was my family needs to have a priority.
And so we would set a time for us as a family to be in the Word together regularly, daily.
If I didn't put it on the calendar and make it a regular practice, that habit would get pushed aside because of the demands of the church that weren't flexible.
It was a learning process for me to go in that direction.
And it was a learning process from my congregation where I would say to them, no, I will not be there until 8:30 in the morning because I am having time with my family first.
And it was a great lesson for the congregational members to see and the families to see that family is important.
My family is important too.
And it's okay for me to say, no, I won't be there at that church meeting

because my family has family devotions at that time of the morning.
And I'm not going to break that habit with my family.
Those are important lessons for all of us to learn.

Mart: I would answer in a similar sort of way.
Busyness was the number one challenge for us.
And so, and I would agree with Dr. Biermann that probably the key thing that we that we worked at to address that was setting aside a time every day to have a formative family devotion, just 15 to 20 minutes.
But we were very committed to that.
And, and the children could see how much Cheryl and I were committed to that.
So during some seasons of our family, you, we would have to have these at 6am because of the school schedules and time before they, they went off to school or they went off to sports even before school.
But it said to our children and to Cheryl and I as well, this is essential for our family.
And, and regardless of what happens in the devotion, the fact that you are making that kind of a statement is impactful to your children.
I've heard them reflect on that time and again, and now they're, they're raising their own children.
You know, we have nine grandchildren and one on the way, and they all seek to do the same thing in their own home.
Not because we said to do it, but because that's the way they were formed and they really valued that.
And just like we were, they too are, are very busy people.
But we turn that busyness challenge into an opportunity to kind of confirm us in our commitment to that this being an important thing.
So as grandpas, what's one thing that you are most proud of your children doing in their own home?

Mart: I would have to say, um, even though they do the, the habit of the daily prayer in their own home is they are very anchored in the promises of God for them in Christ.
So the fact that our children really are focused on Christ for themselves and desire to pass that along to our grandchildren makes us very happy.

Todd: I think it's very important that my children are both seeing the balance of home and congregation together.
They value going to worship together as a family every week.
And they also value growing in their home every day.
And we reinforce that by having family devotion over virtual means where the extended family, mom, dad, children, and grandma and grandpa can get together on a virtual means every week so that we can see that this is important for our extended family too.
And that has been a wonderful part to be, uh, to be a part of that as an extended family.
And the other thing I'll just add that's so important in that mix is the power of confession and forgiveness every day before the sun goes down.
So that you don't let your anger build over a week's time even.
And that the gift of forgiveness you receive in corporate worship is important, but so also from those in your own household when you have wronged one

another to ask for forgiveness in the name of Christ and to receive that word of forgiveness in the name of Christ every day.

I've seen my children practicing that and teaching it already to my grandsons. And that is such an important thing that we want to build into our daily living.

Mart: I would second and third all what he said.

That's right.

Jessica: What about people who are part of our church family who don't have kids or who aren't married?

How would family discipleship be a part of their life?

Well, they are still families, okay?

And so, family discipleship is where you kind of grow in your daily life.

Now, the reason we've talked so much about children is that our basic focus is on that aspect of family discipleship, you know, is trying to help the parents pass on the faith to their children.

Because as I shared before, one of the big challenges that we face today is that parents struggle with that so much, okay?

But it doesn't also mean that we as individuals, either as parents or singles, or as couples without children, that we also need to be continually nurtured in the faith.

And so, we can do that, obviously, by having our own daily devotions, having our own kind of habits that happen in our home to nurture all of us.

Because even when you're raising children, it's nurturing the parents at the same time through those habits in the home.

The other way is that the whole congregation is a household of faith, all right?

It's the family of God in that place.

And we know from research, actually, that the more adult relationships that children in those congregations have that are healthy relationships, the stronger they are in their faith as adults themselves.

And so, helping congregations understand how these other members of the household of the household of faith, besides just the parents of those children, can be a part of that is pretty powerful, impactful stuff.

And I'd say, especially when you have children whose parents are not engaged.

And so, how can other families, individuals, single adults, couples without children, serve as, say, baptismal sponsors, as confirmation sponsors, or just in informal ways, always having conversations with the children of that congregation?

Those are helpful ways that I know of.

And maybe you guys at Concordia Center for the Family have some other thoughts on that.

Todd: Yeah, absolutely.

Backing up what you've just said, Dr. Thompson, excellent words.

And I agree wholeheartedly.

The congregation is a family of sorts, of its own.

And that's why we stress the importance of the partnership of home and congregation.

Because you're single individuals, not yet married, or married and divorced, or widowed, or a couple that doesn't have children, never has, or had them and they've moved on, whatever.

They are important in this congregational family.

And they have an important role in the family discipleship in their own home. Even if you're a single person living by yourself, you are a family growing in faith in Christ because you're united to Christ, the husband of the church. That picture of Christ and his bride, the church is so important. And everyone is in that relationship with Christ, every Christian. And I've had individual older women in my church who lived alone, but they would get together virtually even during COVID time, they would do this and support each other in growing as disciples. And they also would adopt families with younger children in the church that they would help care for, sitting with them in worship. We received that blessing when my wife and I were raising our little ones that my wife Heather would sit by herself in the pew while I was preaching, and grandma would come and join them. Another woman from the church, Mrs. Carpenter, who would come and sit on the other side of the kids so they could bookend the kids. And she helped raise those kids, part of our family. That was an important part of her role as family discipleship leader in our congregation and in our personal home.

Jessica: Mm-hmm.

Well, the final question of the show is always this. What do you want our listeners to remember?

Mart: I want them to remember that Christ is the one that is doing this work of raising up disciples. Now, he commissioned his church to go out and make disciples, right? And he says, baptize and teach all that I have commanded you. And the members of Christ Church, whether you're in the office of the ministry or whether you're a parent in a home or whether you're a child in a home, we're always focused on sharing the word of Christ with one another, his message of forgiveness for our sins, his message of life and salvation. And if we keep our focus there, even when we try and fail, we actually don't fail because we're clinging to Christ and we're growing in our trust in him and his mercy. And when children see parents do that, they grow in the faith. When, as we were talking before, when we share that forgiveness of Christ, with one another, in the face of our failings, because we all fail. We live in a broken world and we're sinners. When we share that forgiveness with one another, we're building one another up in the faith, which is what discipleship is about, which is what we're trying to pass on to our children. So that's what family discipleship is about. So keeping Christ at the center is probably the most important thing that I think we can do. But we have to be intentional about that in the home as well as in the congregation.

Jessica: Dr. Biermann, what would you like our listeners to remember?

Todd: There's no home that's so broken that Christ cannot restore. He takes the dead and raises them. He can take a home that seems like it's dead, that there's no spiritual hope of

any kind, and renew and give life to that home and that family.
And I've seen it happen through my years of ministry, and I rejoice with the privilege to be able to see it happen more and more in our Lutheran Church Missouri Synod as more families grow as disciples of Jesus every day with His grace abounding.

Jessica: That's it for today.
I'd like to thank our guest, Dr. Thompson.
Thank you for being on the show.

Mart: It's my pleasure.
Thanks for asking us to be here.

Jessica: Dr. Biermann, thanks for coming.

Todd: My pleasure.

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