

## **"Adult-Sized Problems With a Child-Sized Faith"**

HEBREWS 5:11-6:3

As amazing as this may sound, I have had some startling interactions with people in the most unlikely place; the golf course. It is not a place I am able to visit often, but when I do, I have had some of the most interesting conversations between tee and green, especially during those years when I was an active clergyperson.

Take this story, for example: One Monday morning, I joined up with two other men who were restaurant workers and like me, had Mondays off. After a few holes, they discovered that I was a minister and the flow of the conversation naturally changed to include the church, and faith in general. Both men had been active as children and youth in their respective churches. They had attended Sunday School, youth group, and confirmation classes.

Yet, as they went off to college, got married, and began families, they lost interest because they perceived church as simplistic and irrelevant. Not only that, but these men felt somewhat betrayed by their faith because it didn't help them to make sense of life. They were very frank with me, and I had to try hard not to take offense at some of the things they said. Yet, for them, the great stories and teachings that they had learned as children were offering them little comfort in their adult lives, which were filled with ethical dilemmas, injustices, racial and ethnic tension, illness and death, financial hardship, and lots of other thorny problems.

POW! BAM! KAZAM! That's when it hit me. These men were trying to face ADULT-SIZED PROBLEMS WITH A CHILD-SIZED FAITH. They had never moved beyond the faith of their childhood, so no wonder it didn't make sense! No wonder the church seemed irrelevant! They were carrying around the cherished security blanket of their childhood. But now, as adults, that blanket was tattered and falling apart. In the face of adult-sized problems, their child-sized faith was unraveling.

So, there I was, on the tenth hole, having one of my theological "ah-ha" experiences where lots of little things that I had been thinking about for a long time all came together. ADULT-SIZED PROBLEMS WITH A CHILD-SIZED FAITH. It explained many things. Allow me to digress...

As a Minister, I have had the privilege to be with families in their hours of greatest joy and deepest despair. I have had entrée into the outer extremes of life, if you will. Although most everyone deals easily with joy, it has been my experience that people who have not nurtured their adult faith do poorly with adversity. Be it illness, unemployment, forgiveness, or death, they have no theological framework to cope with a world that appears to be total CHAOS. And..., when this happens (and it does), they may act out in inappropriate, irrational, symptomatic ways.

This was never more clear to me than one day, years ago, when I was the officiant for one funeral in the morning for a family who had not darkened the doors of a church for twenty years, and another service in the afternoon for a family whose members were active and involved in the development of their faith. There were tears of grief and sadness at both, yet, what the families chose to do with those emotions was entirely different. The family with the adult-sized faith channeled their grief in positive ways--supporting each other, comforting each other, and offering hope. The family with the child-sized faith directed their grief in angry ways at others--blaming, arguing, snapping at each other, and loading on the guilt. There was no sense of new beginning; no hope, only death, darkness and despair.

Perhaps you have also noticed how differently people with an adult-sized faith are able to cope and heal in the wake of adult-sized problems. Throughout my life, I have consistently been drawn to others who are emotionally healthy, positive, loving, and generous. Most of these mentors, colleagues, and friends have been deeply committed Christians, but there have also been Buddhists, Muslims, and Jews. Within their own traditions, they have been those who have worked hard at nurturing and growing their faith throughout their lives. They were people who understood that learning is a lifetime exercise that never stops—and that certainly is true with our theological competence. I don't know about you, but I notice a real difference in hearts and souls of people who take their personal growth seriously...attend classes and study groups, read books, journal, get involved in community service, keep an open mind and heart...

I find it fascinating that what people are struggling with today are often the same issues faced by people of faith down through the ages. Paul, as he writes in his letter to the Hebrews, reveals just such a situation. Because many of the people he is writing to have not been *exercising their faith* (I love that phrase), they have not matured to the point where they can comprehend more complex teachings that Paul is trying to convey.

In Chapter five, Paul has been trying to instruct them using the metaphor of Jesus as the Great High Priest. However, he stops short of completing his thought because he knows that he is not writing to people who will be able to understand. In verse eleven, Paul says to them, "There is MUCH that I have to say about this, but it is *hard to explain* because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to TEACH YOU the elementary truths of God's word all over again." The path to maturity, Paul goes on to say in verse 14, is achieved by those "who by CONSTANT USE have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

Everyone knows that the only way you get better at something is by practice. We know that we will never learn to play an instrument if we don't pick it up and play it over and over again. Yet, why do people get frustrated when their faith, which they haven't done anything to deepen, doesn't work for them? (A singer/songwriter friend of mine named David Roth has a song which says that "Practice Makes Progress" which I far prefer to the "practice makes perfect" saying, which only burdens us with the unattainable goal of perfection.)

This morning, I run the risk of preaching to the choir. You, are here this morning, because you are committed to deepening your faith through worship and service—that's a good start. I share these thoughts with you because, like me, many of you come into contact with people like the two men who I played golf with, and you need to be ready to say to people like them that their frustration may not have to do with the church or the people in the church. Their frustration may have to do with facing adult-sized problems with a child-sized faith. As Paul would very bluntly say, they are the ones who are lacking, because through inactivity they have not developed beyond the most elementary understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, men are the demographic group within the life of the church who are most at risk of drifting away and neglecting the development of an adult faith. Some of this has to do with the model of teaching that most churches have been using for more than a century, which is very passive. On any given Sunday, at any location around the globe, it is almost certain that between 60-70% of those attending worship, leading groups, or teaching the next generation, will be female. Look around you today, I did a quick head count earlier and discovered that \_\_\_% of the people here this morning are female. We have not done enough to help men know that church is a safe and important place for them to develop an adult-sized faith.

Purely as a side note, I would like to say that this concept about having a child-sized faith not only applies to our understanding of faith development, but is equally relevant to the struggles in our civic life in America. I dare say that some of the rancor that we are experiencing in the political sphere can be traced to *underdevelopment or lack of exercise* (I'm not going to call it ignorance) of Americans to study and grow in their understanding of what it means to function in a democracy. I feel that many Americans are trying to face adult-sized moral, ethical, and political problems with a child-sized understanding of how our legal, medical, government, and other systems function. These institutions are complex machines that are only able to function when you have competent adults in the room. My point is if you run a congregation with what you learned in Sunday School, you are going to get the same poor results as if you tried to run a government (or a nation) on what you learned in elementary school.

I want to conclude my sermon by saying a few words about the ramifications of what Paul says in Hebrews and what I have said about facing adult-sized problems with a child-sized faith:

The ramifications have to do with "Rethinking Adult Christian Education." (Quotes from Joan Day): "Christianity is a faith defined from an adult model. Jesus blessed the little children but **WORKED WITH ADULTS**. Unfortunately, most churches have difficulty with this reality. Most churches are putting the bulk of their efforts into the children's educational programs **hoping the children will hang onto their learning until they are adults**. Unfortunately, those children never trade in that learning for an adult model. And so, they are left carrying around the faith of childhood. And then, suddenly, they are faced with adult-sized problems with a child-sized faith." Imagine how overwhelmed and frustrated I would be if I had to make sense of a tax return, a mortgage payment, or bank interest rates if I only had elementary school math to help me. It is the same for Christian faith.

"Christian Education is not just for children, it is also vital for adults. Much more emphasis and attention must be given to the adults in the church if we are to support people on their journey of faith." I know that some of you have been involved in this work and have been attending groups with Bridge Pastor Kate Stevens and others—this is heartwarming because this is where real faith nurturing and faith sustaining takes place.

In the past, adult Christian Education was understood as a way of teaching more advanced principles to the mature believer—college level stuff. Today, much of our adult Christian education needs to be understood as **basic Christian formation**. So many people who come to join us on the journey have the most basic background in the Bible, spiritual practice, and so forth. This means starting from the ground up and transforming a child-sized faith into the most basic of adult-sized faith. This is surely an uphill battle because the lives of members and friends are already so full. There are so many demands on our time and energy it is hard to make our own spiritual education a priority.

I think you can tell how strongly I feel about the importance of adult Christian education to the success and growth of congregations. Thus, I close with Paul's exhortation to the Christians of his day, "Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity..." Amen.

(Concept and quotes in this sermon came from an article by Joan Day in the American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts newsletter, *The Tutor*, circa 1985)