

Imbued with Grace

John 17:20-26

Seventh Sunday of Easter/20th May 2007

Will our children have faith? That's the nagging question just below the surface for most of us, particularly parents. It's why we bring our children to church school and worship; it's why we encourage them to be part of the youth program. Will they come to trust in God? Will they love Jesus? Will they follow the Holy Spirit? Will they be part of the church? Will their lives bring glory to God? So we try to do our best. We try to give them good church school training, happy memories of going to worship, formative mission trip experiences, Bible knowledge, Christian theology 101. But when confirmation time comes around, what if they don't confess Christ? I've known many parents, strong in the faith, who feel embarrassed, maybe ashamed, as if it's their fault when their own son or daughter decides not to join the church (sometimes with really good reasons). What then? Are we failures as parents or teachers/youth leaders or ministers? Or what if they are confirmed but go off to college and never return to the church, get married, have children of their own who are never baptized? What then? Will our children have faith? Will they be Christian? Are there any guarantees this will happen?

Nathaniel Volf was barely two years old when he asked his father the "biggest question a person, regardless of age, can ask. 'Daddy,' said Nathaniel, 'what God mean?'" Nathaniel's father is Miroslav Volf, an internationally recognized Christian theologian who teaches at Yale Divinity School. But those credentials didn't help him one bit. "I was taken aback," he confessed. He did his best, told Nathaniel about the God who created the sky, the seas, the land, and all the other animals, but he wasn't satisfied with his answer. Reflecting on the experience, he said, "I was talking past [Nathaniel] and felt humiliated as a theologian (though I am not sure that one could answer this question in any way that a two-year-old would understand)." A friend reassured him that in such moments "what you say to a child is not nearly so important as what you do."¹

It is true, sometimes our actions speak louder than words, but as a theologian, whose world *is* words about God – *theos-logos* – Volf also came to realize that words must matter too. What makes us distinctive as Christians is

¹ Cited in Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey – Bass, 2004), 150.

the language we use for God. How we talk about God and *to* God and talk to one another *from* our experience *in* God all count a lot. But will his son come to faith? There are no guarantees. This much is clear: *how we speak of God matters just as much as what we do*. Finding the right language for God is no easy task and requires grace. It's not like learning French or mastering a skill on our own. "Right language about God matters," Volf says, but finally all parental talk and action can take root only by the grace of God. "If the seed sown by word and deed is to grow and bear fruit," Volf says, "it will need the life-giving water of God's Spirit."² Will our children have faith? *If words and actions are imbued with grace*.

Everything comes down to grace in the end, doesn't it? Whether it's the faith of our children or our own, it's all contingent upon God's gracious Spirit teaching the human spirit the depths of God's love. The good news when we realize this is that it takes the pressure and responsibility off of us as parents, teachers, and ministers – one less thing to worry over, I guess. Grace relieves our anxiety. We can place our child in God's providential care. Which is what we affirm for them and ourselves in baptism, right?

But if we really want something to worry about, for those of us who love to worry, if we want a project to work on, let us worry about something that we actually have some control over: *our* faith as adults, whether or not we have a mature faith and whether we are growing in our knowledge of God. The rule when flying – in the loss of cabin air pressure, secure your air mask *first* and then assist your children – applies to caring for our children. "Worry" is actually the wrong word here, because we need to turn our focus away from ourselves, of trying to get it right, away from that pernicious enemy Perfectionism, and turn our attention to God. This is not avoidance. Some might think it's irresponsible of me to say this. Maybe – but it's theologically true.

Why? *Because you can't teach a person to become a Christian*. You can teach a person to become *religious*, but that's not the same as being a person of faith. Is it really possible to teach for faith? It took me, personally, a long time to understand this difference. I had an excellent Christian education, extraordinary teachers. My mother was a church school teacher for forty years. I had amazing youth ministers from Princeton Seminary, starting in sixth grade. I became a church school teacher in high school and later a youth director and youth minister. I was properly socialized into the church. But when I took my first

² Long, p. 151.

Christian education class at seminary, my world was shattered. We have been seduced into believing that one can train or nurture a young child into becoming a Christian.³ It's possible to teach *religion* and even teach about a particular religion, such as Christianity. But that's not the same thing as helping a person come to a living faith in a living God. Religion is concerned about institutions (churches) and their traditions, documents, statements of belief (Bible and theology), and our convictions and moral codes. Religion is how faith can be expressed, but it should not be confused with faith. There's a place for religion, but it's not an end in itself, faith is the only end.⁴ The two are often confused, especially in the church. Faith, not religion, must become the concern of Christian education, as Christian educator John Westerhoff argues. Faith is a deeply personal, dynamic, relationship of trust. Trust cannot be learned in a book, even the Bible; it must be *experienced*. "Teaching people *about* Christianity is not very important" for the church, Westerhoff argues (and I would agree).⁵ This might sound odd for a minister to say. By focusing too much on religion – institutions, creedal statements, documents, moral codes – it's not surprising that Christianity as a vital faith has seriously diminished.

To push this further, Westerhoff claims: "There is a great difference between learning about the Bible and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ. We are not saved by our knowledge, or beliefs, or our worship in the church; just as we are not saved by our actions or our religion. We are saved by the anguish and love of God, and to live according to that truth is to have faith. Faith cannot be taught by any method of instruction...we can know about religion, but we can only expand in faith, act in faith, live in faith. Faith can be inspired within a community of faith, but it cannot be given to one person by another."⁶

Can you see how easy it is to confuse religion with faith? It's possible to leave church school, have all the right answers, know right from wrong, know the history and belief of the church, know how to worship, but end up an educated atheist. But it's also possible to leave the church having caught the true spirit of Christ, faithfully following him in the world, wanting to be part of an authentic community of faith, but frustrated that the church is too wrapped up in itself, in its religious trappings, and too scared to really go where Jesus wants it to go.

³ See James E. Loder, *Religious Pathology and Christian Faith* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

⁴ This distinction is helpfully summarized by John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), 18.

⁵ Westerhoff, 18, 19.

⁶ Westerhoff, 19.

So what can we *do*? What can we *say*? Where are words and actions imbued with grace? One word, one place: *Prayer*. Words and actions imbued with grace, which then shapes our words and our actions. Pray for God to be present in us and in our children. Pray that we become open to the presence of Christ in our lives and pray that our children become open to the presence of Christ in their lives. Pray that the Holy Spirit will show us the love and the grace and the joy of God, and pray that the Holy Spirit will show our children the love and the grace and the joy – and fun – of God.

This is modeled for us in Jesus' priestly prayer in John. We only read six verses of it today, but read it all again. Look at the depth of the relationship between Jesus and God, of Jesus' hopes for his followers. But also notice something else; Jesus is praying for us, on our behalf, that we know what it feels like to be one with God just as Jesus is one with God. We don't do all of this alone. Even when we pray for ourselves and for our children, there's something else we need to remember: that Jesus is actually praying *for us* and *through us*, hoping for us, loving us. The entire priestly prayer captures this: "*I ask on...their behalf.*"

But for those of us who still want something to *do*, we can provide contexts that allow for meaningful words and actions. There's a line in that great hymn to the Holy Spirit, (we sang it last week, "Come Down, O Love Divine), "No one can guess God's grace, till love creates a space, wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling."⁷ Love creates a space, spaces for faith to flourish. If you think about it, this is about all we *can* do. That's what communities of faith do – like this church, but even more importantly, in our *homes*, where children and adults know they are truly loved and accepted, in our faith and in our doubt. We can create places where children know they are safe and secure. We can create contexts for faith to flourish. We talk openly about our relationship with God, such as when we pray together – whether here in worship or before meals or at bedtime. We create spaces when we talk openly and honestly about God, not to teach or inform or stuff ourselves or others with religious facts and data and set up unrealistic behavioral expectations, but to talk about God's presence and interaction and guidance, where we talk about what God is teaching us and where we experience God's presence.

I learned the books of the Bible as a child, memorized verses and learned my catechism. I got all the facts right, could pass any standardized Christian

⁷ Words by Bianco da Siena (d.1434, Venice).

aptitude test. But it was all worth a hill of beans, meant nothing, until I realized and discovered people for whom being Christian was not knowledge, but an *experience of grace*, offering a profound vision and perspective of reality that was transforming and transformative. It's been said Christianity cannot be learned, but it can be *caught* – which means placing ourselves and our children around people who are “infectious” with this grace, who become contagious. Those folks in my life have been people who truly loved me and believed in me and offered me a vision of the world that transfixed and transfigured my life, known most profoundly in people who encouraged me to think deeply about the faith, to fathom the depths of the Spirit's joy and power, to question, question, question, and to wrestle with this experience of God with every fiber of my being.

The key is being open to those places where words and actions are imbued with grace and to realize that the Spirit of God is already there in the world and in the lives of our children long before we try to teach them anything. That's why creating and protecting these spaces for faith to flourish is crucial. We need to be open to the Spirit moving in our lives and the lives of our children, sometimes way ahead of us, beyond what we know. Any context can be the place where faith can flourish – like in a sandbox.

Brad Wigger is a Christian educator who has thought a lot about how faith is communicated within families. In his book *The Power of God at Home*, he tells the story of an experience with his three-year-old son, David. Shortly after moving across town to a new apartment, Brad was praying with David at bedtime. David prayed for blessings for his friends, family, pets, and stuffed animals, but then he said the unexpected. “And God,” he said, “I miss you.” [What do you say to that comment?] Immediately, Brad wanted to relieve his son's anxiety, but he decided, in the maturity of his faith, to say nothing. So he went to bed and told his wife and both of them began to worry together that their son missed God. The next morning over breakfast, Brad brought up the missing-God subject.

“Last night when you were praying, you said you missed God.”

“Oh yeah,” he answered, “but that's okay now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Dave said, “God came to me last night.”

Brad interrupted, “You mean like in a dream?” [His “modern brain had to find some way to explain it,” Brad writes.]

“I dunno, I guess –” David said.

“Anyway, I was playin’ in the sandbox behind our old house, and God came and said, ‘Come, David,’ so I followed, and we came here and now God is here with us in our new home!”⁸

God’s already at work in the lives of our children. It’s our job to provide environments where that faith can grow and flourish and live – and to pray.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Kovacs

*Catonsville Presbyterian Church
Catonsville, Maryland*

⁸ Cited in Long, 152.