

“Will Our Children Have Faith?”

THIS MORNING I bring you an important question. Here's the question. Will our children have faith?

Now, likely you will agree with me, when I say that when children participate in a church like ours they receive many good things.

For example, through church participation, children can learn socialization skills. In church they can learn what it means to be part of a caring fellowship. In church children can make life-long friends. They can also learn to respect the rights and feelings of others.

By participating in church worship services and other special presentations, children can develop self-confidence and poise in public speaking and relating to an audience. In church, children can develop their musical, acting, and artistic skills.

Children can also find positive adult role models in church, to guide their behavior. In church, children can develop a sense of self-esteem.

As you can see, there are many, many good things which children can receive through their participation in a Christian church. But here's the big question which confronts our church and all churches of Jesus Christ. This big question: in addition to all those good things our children can receive from our church, do they also receive faith?

AS A MODERN CHRISTIAN CHURCH:

- we can employ the most up to-date methods of helping our children with their socialization skills.
- we can teach our children to be decent citizens in the community.
- we can help our children develop their personal gifts and talents.
- we can give them a positive sense of belonging and enhance their self-esteem.

We can, and probably should, do all those things and more. But the question still hangs. When our children [and grandchildren] finally leave the doors of our church to go out as adults, into the wider world, will they have faith?

Will our children [and grandchildren] go out into the world with a deep and passionate belief in God? As they go on to higher education, employment, and raising their own families, will our children [and grandchildren] have a trust in God so strong, that it will guide and sustain them, even through the darkest of life's valleys?

Will our children know the great joy of the Christian gospel? Will they go out from our church, truly accepting the risen Christ as their Lord and Savior? And will they discover that wonderful sense of purpose and fulfillment which comes to all, who strive sincerely to be Christ's disciples?

To speak biblically:

--will our children [and grandchildren] know The Good Shepherd?

--will our children [and grandchildren] receive that "living water" which gushes up to eternal life, and that true "bread of life" which perisheth not?

--And will they be inspired, because of their experiences in our church, to "seek first God's kingdom," as Jesus called his devout followers to do?

Children can receive many good things from a Christian church. But do they also receive faith?

I BELIEVE THAT Christian churches are much like lighthouses. It takes many different building blocks to make a lighthouse tall and strong. However, by far, the most important thing about any lighthouse is its light.

Such things as social skills, respect for others, self-confidence, models for good behavior, and the development of personal talents are all very important building blocks in a church's ministry to young people.

However, beyond such building blocks, the true light of any Christian church is really its faith--both the faith a church projects out to the world, and the faith it inspires in its own people, and particularly in its children.

A church can be a veritable fortress of building blocks, busy day and night with activities. But such a church, can still be a very weak light of faith--for the world, for itself, and for its own children and young people.

CAN YOU IMAGINE a lighthouse without a light? When the light of faith grows dim in a church, it really is very sad. For, as you heard in our first scripture reading this morning, Jesus called his followers to be "the light of the world."

Faith is crucial to Christian churches. For where faith and its cultivation are dim or lacking, churches are diminished. They are diminished, and they become just another social club, another community activity, another public stage for performances.

In fact, the number one job of any Christian Church should be to nurture Christian faith!

I'LL NOW MOVE ON to another point. Mainline Protestant churches like ours, have a problem today. To speak frankly, we have long been used to living in a culture which is overwhelmingly Protestant.

Through the centuries, Protestantism has had a profound influence on American society. As you know, Protestants built most of our country's early colleges. They were pioneers in establishing social betterment groups for our society. The YMCA is a prime example of that. And Protestants, such as those in our Congregational churches, were early and staunch supporters of the American public school system.

A generation ago, noted mainline Protestant ministers could easily make newspaper headlines with their sermons, and occasionally, "Time Magazine" covers with their pronouncements.

A generation ago, children in public schools were still being led in daily worship and devotional readings, and usually from Protestant Bibles.

In days gone by, American culture readily reflected the Protestant faith back to our churches. For example, if a child didn't learn a particular Protestant value or song in her church, there was always a chance she would still learn that value or song in her public school instead. Christmas carols are an example of that.

In days gone by, widely respected models of Protestant faith and belief were readily found in the news media, in government, in the public school system, in the business world, and virtually anywhere else one could imagine.

Other religious groups existed, and some in large numbers, but the long established Protestant point of view was pervasive.

HOWEVER, today in our society, the situation is radically different. For the fact of religious pluralism has successfully edged Protestantism, and particularly mainline Protestantism, out of the primary role it once had in our society. And quite often, in today's public arenas, a growing secularism has displaced religion.

Also, when Protestant religious leaders do manage to be visible in our culture at large, all too often they tend to be Protestant extremists.

They tend to be extremists like the minister in Florida connected with the recent Koran-burning issue or the minister from Kansas, who takes his parishioners around the country to protest and spew anti-gay hatred at the funerals of military personnel. In 2006 there was a funeral in Maryland for a 20-year old Marine who had died in Iraq. One of the hate-filled signs that minister brought to that funeral said this:

“Thank God For Dead Soldiers.”ⁱ

Such extremists and purveyors of hate in the name of faith, certainly do not reflect my understanding, or our church’s understanding, of modern Protestantism and its view of Christian discipleship.

SPEAKING OF SECULARISM, I was struck a couple of weeks ago by an

Associated Press newspaper report which told of an American returning to Boston after being held captive in North Korea. As you may recall, former President Jimmy Carter assisted in that man’s release. That article told of the man’s homecoming and of a banner lifted up then to welcome him. That banner contained a Christian symbol and Bible verses, including a passage from Job.

I certainly was glad for that man’s release. But, here’s what struck me. The writer of that article apparently felt it was necessary to tell his readership what Job was. As the author wrote,

*The banner...contained biblical references to Acts, Psalms, and Job, an Old Testament book about a man who survived great tribulation.*ⁱⁱ

Apparently, the author assumed, and likely quite correctly, that a significant percent of his readers wouldn’t have a clue as to what or who Job was.

And, that’s how I think it really is in our culture today. In generations past, our culture was steeped in biblical images and biblical teachings. Back then, our culture was a great mirror, which reflected back to our children many of the Bible stories and biblical principles of our faith. In essence, back then, our culture reinforced the efforts of churches like ours, to teach our faith.

But, that’s not the story today. For today, many Americans--including a significant number of church people, I’m sad to say--are essentially illiterate when it comes to the Bible. Beyond not understanding the Bible, a lot of people really don’t even know, much about what is in it.

For example, according to one study, 60% of Americans tested could not name five of the Ten Commandments.ⁱⁱⁱ Also, a widely quoted Gallup Poll about a decade ago concluded that,

Fewer than half of Americans can name the first book of the Bible (Genesis), only one-third know who delivered the Sermon on the Mount (many named Billy Graham, not Jesus), and one-quarter do not know what is celebrated on Easter (the Resurrection, the foundational event of Christianity).^{iv}

Personally, and speaking both as a Christian and an American, I appreciate and respect the religious pluralism of our modern society.

I am not interested in imposing my Protestant faith upon others who sincerely practice their own faith.

To my mind, the freedom of religion in our country, is one of our country's greatest treasures, and that treasure needs to be honored and preserved.

But, having said that, I also need to say this. Given the more apparent religious pluralism in our nation today, given the growing secularism of our culture today, and given the lack of many strong, mainline Protestant role models visible in our media today, it really is important that churches like ours acknowledge those changes, and compensate for them.

For centuries, churches like ours have relied on our culture to do a significant portion of the religious rearing of our children. For centuries we have benefitted from the fact, that our religious faith has been reinforced, amplified, and, at times, even modeled by our public schools, our business communities, our media, and our government.

But times are dramatically different now! As churches and as individual church families, we now stand pretty much alone!

There are very few Protestant mirrors out in our culture today, to reflect our faith back to us. Just as there are very few mainline Protestant role models, whose visibility in our wider culture today, is great enough, for our children to notice and emulate them.

In today's society, the responsibility for the religious rearing of our children, has been left entirely on our shoulders alone. And if our children do not receive our faith from us, then very likely they will not receive that faith at all!

If we, as parents, and as a church, are not willing to take up that responsibility fully, then who else can we depend upon today, to nurture our children in our faith?

Can we depend on television--in between all the violence and all the crime--to teach our children about the ways of The Good Shepherd?

Can we depend on today's popular music--rap music included--to lead our children to that "bread of life" which perisheth not?

The simple truth in our society today is this: If we want our children to have faith, then we, with God's help, must be the one's who try to teach and inspire our children with that faith. We must try to do that in our homes, and in our church.

As I said before, Christian churches are like lighthouses. Their ultimate

purpose is to shine with the light of faith.

OUR BELOVED CHURCH is over 300 years old. Yet, I would say that over all those years, there has never been a time like this time, when our church--and others like it in our country--have needed to shine so brightly, for the sake of our world, for the sake of ourselves, and especially for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

Will our children have faith?

That's a haunting question, which should make any sincere Christian stir. For our faith is always just one generation away from extinction. It's just a generation away from extinction, if we fail to pass that faith on to the next generation.

WILL OUR CHILDREN HAVE FAITH? Today is Rally Sunday. It's also Covenant Sunday. This is the day when both our church school and our Confirmation Class begin their new year.

The fact is that our church school and our Confirmation Class really need the support of us all in the vital work they are doing.

They need our prayers, our emotional and financial support, and our hands-on participation in their work. Through the year, our church school classes will need additional teachers to help them with their rotation sessions. Also, our Confirmation class may need some helping hands.

If either of those groups, or youth groups we are forming, invite you to help them, will you say "yes"?

But that's not all they need. To be successful, our children and young people also need to be inspired by our congregation's faith.

When it is at its best, our church is a strong lighthouse. And so, as a congregation, and as individual Christians in it, let's make sure we model our faith well, and that we share our personal faith with our children and young people.

Let's be sure we let our faith shine in everything we do, so our children and young people will see our faith, understand it, and be inspired to have such faith in their own lives too.

For in our modern society, if we don't pass our precious faith on to our own children, who else will?

ENDNOTES

- i. Joan Biskupic, "Protest At Military Funeral Ignites a Test of Free Speech," *USA Today*, Updated 8/30/2010. http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2010-08-30-1Afuneralprotests_CV_N.htm (September 11, 2010).
- ii. "Captive's family 'grateful': With Jimmy Carter's help, American returns to Boston after being held in North Korea." *The Associated Press*, Boston, MA, Cape Cod Times, Saturday, August 28, 2010.
- iii. Quoted in Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Americans Get an 'F' in Religion," *USA Today*, updated 3/14/2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-03-07-teaching-religion-cover_N.htm (September 11, 2010).
- iv. David Gibson, "America's Favorite Unopened Text: The Bible is the least-read best-seller of all time." *BeliefNet*. <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Christianity/2000/12/Americas-Favorite-Unopened-Text.aspx> (September 11, 2010).

With each passing year it grows harder and harder for our children to keep the faith. Indeed, such a thing is now scarcely possible for a young boy or girl, especially one who has not been given the foundation and protection of a true Christian education.Â The academic world "and these words are neither lightly nor easily spoken" has become today, in large part, a source of corruption. It is corrupting to hear or read the words of men who do not believe in truth. It is yet more corrupting to receive, in place of truth, mere learning and scholarship which, if they are presented as ends in themselves, are no more than parodies of the truth they were meant to serve, no more than a facade behind which there is no substance. If parents realize how our faith develops and then look for spontaneous opportunities to share their faith (sometimes by simply saying, "Look at the tiny legs that God made for those ants!") they can be spiritual mentors for their children. Read more. 2 people found this helpful. Helpful. Comment Report abuse. See all reviews. Top reviews from other countries. An edition of Will our children have faith? (1976). Will our children have faith?