

“Circles of Faith”
September 12, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church
Exodus 17: 1-7
Hebrews 5: 11-14

Milk is okay. Skim. 1%. Whole milk.

It's splendid for little guys and gals. Did you drink your glass of milk today?

Splendid for those littlest ones.

Momma's milk.

Formula in the baby bottle.

Perfect for babies because we hardly are going to feed them jambalaya or chili. That'll leave a mess in their diapers. That'll rumble up their little tummies.

But it's real unlikely if I'm having a dinner party with friends, I'm going to serve up infant formula. Baby bottle at each place setting.

Unlikely. Likelier is that bowl of jambalaya or a fine wine accompanying a Tuscan recipe: garlic, basil, tomato, braised veal, lots of onion and pasta...

So it is with the recipe of faith. Milk is fine for the infants in Christianity. Those untested, unsullied, untried.

But you expect that their taste buds will mature.

You expect their faith to widen beyond the infantile or juvenile.

That's what's vexing the author of Hebrews.

The people to whom the author of Hebrews is preaching this sermon actually are relapsing to the infantile. I view him as a Seminary President in Jerusalem, talking to the seminary students who are all former priest, :Levites. They're going backwards. They are returning to the old comfortable traditions.

Who lives on milk? Those unskilled in the word of righteousness. By now they ought to themselves be teaching others, but they still need teachers.

What they really need are nursemaids, wet nurses. They can't handle the more complex notions or challenges. Solid food is for the mature.

They aren't mature.

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Studies in the psychology of faith have been instructive. Cueing off the work of such psychologists as Piaget and Erickson, we've come to a description of the various circles or stages of faith development.

Piaget, as all those trained in education must learn, described childhood as Concrete Operational – one dimensional, literal, all the world is perceived by what you hold true. Sounds like some preachers in Florida.

Adolescence demonstrates Formal Operational, where adolescents begin to see the world from other perspectives, they are able to separate the meaning from the thing itself

Erick H. Erickson, one of my favorites, did significant work in describing the stages of identity development, how we are pushed to the next level of our identity when the one you're in becomes conflicted and no longer can sustain itself. Crises shove us into growing up.

Similar work outlines faith development.

Now, let it be said, each circle or stage has its own merit. It is fine for those at that level. It meets their need. Where you are is great if that is where you are.

The point is that you cannot stay there. Imagine it similar to a musician. Starting off you think yourself great when you master chopsticks. Mozart didn't stay playing chopsticks. His trained faculties, his effort freed him to play very well. Mature in his music, he could even play chopsticks with skill and flair.

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Here is a consolidated sketch of the different circles of faith:

Experiential: birth to age 7

Faith is formed by trust and love and security from the environment you experience

The world is you

You are appropriately egocentric

Magic is real, very superstitious too: if I am bad, I am punished, if I do good, I am rewarded

Santa, Jesus, mom – all the same

Stories are exactly as they are

Innocence of acceptance

For example: Noah's Ark – it is singing the song Arky Arky that matters, being able to play with the animals...

Affiliative: 7 to 12

Desire to conform, to affiliate, to please those in authority

Second hand faith

Them is us

Accept what the group says

You insist on rules and fairness

Faith is a matter of the rules and doctrines

Stories are true because the authority says they are

For example: Noah's Ark – it happened the way the Bible says, two by two, you imagine all the animals being cared for...

Searching: 13 plus

Staking out your own beliefs by asking and doubting and searching for your own answers

Staking out your own individuality by what you criticize

Challenge conformity

Us versus them

Challenge the group values

Discover unfairness

Discover the flaws in the group and the authority figures

Question whether the stories in Bible can be trusted

The world is framed as Either/Or

Example: Noah's Ark – you begin to calculate how all the animals could get in there, you wonder why the lions didn't eat the gazelles, you question why one passage tells two by two, but another passage tells about 7 pairs of animals, it doesn't make sense...

Mature

You enjoy a faith you own and a faith that owns you

Faith is personal you've taken responsibility for it

You have reconciled the unfairness and flaws with a loving acceptance

You appreciate the world isn't you

No longer either/or but both/and, embracing the paradox

Can hold contradictory notions

Faith is far more than rules and doctrines

Recovery of the innocence of faith

See the meaning in the story, the Bible becomes a living document

Truth is multidimensional and universal

Example: Noah's Ark – you refuse to get stuck on the details, you refuse to get stuck on the improbability, you begin to appreciate the other stories from other faiths that include a flood narrative, you appreciate what the story of Noah says about God's wrath and protection, and how actually it didn't change the way we behave, you find meaning in the message...

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Most congregations and most Christians rarely get beyond the Affiliative Stage. We remain at third grade in our understanding of the Bible. We teach to the conformist level. It works if you are in Third Grade but it remains woefully unhelpful for dealing with Adult problems when Adults are stuck in a Third Grade faith.

No wonder we lose so many teenagers who hit the searching stage – we fail to point them toward the mature stage, we force them into that either/or. Why should we be surprised then when they choose to reject faith?

Yet it is these crises, the conflicts, that shove us into growing up.

Where are you? At which stage, which circle?

How are you growing? More so, what are you doing to move toward a mature faith?

A readiness to be taught? A hunger to learn?

Faith practiced and applied and evaluated?

Study, prayer, reflection? Your faculties trained?

I rather like how churches originally were understood as Seminaries, training teachers.

You are the teachers, called to go out and teach Christ daily.