

WBC 15 Aug 2004

Revisioning Sunday 2 – Children, Youth and Westgate Baptist Community
Short Reflective talk

Text: Mark 10:13-16

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. *14* But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. *15* Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." *16* And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Intro: Learning by doing and watching

Learning to drive...history repeats itself..

On a deserted road in a new estate at the back of Diamond Creek a skinny pimply faced 17 year old boy gets out of the passenger seat of the Austin 1800 and slides the shiny yellow L-plates into the brackets on the front and back of the car. He hops into the driver's seat and trying desperately to remember all the stuff he has read about how to drive.

His nervous father gently suggests he start the engine first then put his foot on the clutch and shift into first gear. "I know, I know" says the slightly over-confident boy who proceeds to rev the guts out of the engine then violently stall it as he flips the clutch far too quickly.

Some minutes and several stomach lurching kangaroo hops later the car is finally moving and shift into second gear takes place as the car slowly speeds up. The only problem is that at this point the boy has been too busy interpreting the diagram on the top of the gear stick to notice that the road they are traveling on has quickly become a dead end.

His father seems to have reverted to a one word vocabulary which he is repeating over and over again, brake! Brake! BRAKE!. He also seems intent on creating a distinct dint on the right-hand side of the passenger floor pan. The car comes to an abrupt halt just in time and the boy finally hits the clutch but not before the engine has violently stalled. Sweating profusely, the patient father turns to the boy and says, "Hmm ..Well, perhaps we ought to try that again!"

This is a true story because the 17 year old boy was me and this is pretty much how my first driving lesson took place. My father survived the ordeal and I have been driving competently (most of the time) now for over 25 years.

The weird thing is this.. I am now in the passenger seat in this story – I am trying to create a foot shaped dint where the duplicate brake should be – I am trying to remember what it was like and how I learned the skill of driving a car. I am the one who is trying to be patient and realize that mistakes and practice is the only way you learn to do it...

(I do have to add that Tim did far better than I did on my first attempt!)

Most of us adults here today who drive a car know how naturally and second-nature the skill is. And I would venture to suggest that most of us drivers forget just how hard it was to get the hang of it and to become confident and safe on the road.

And I would suggest too, that many of you who are teenagers and approaching or reaching the age of learner's permit probably find it hard to image that your parents were once where you are and most likely experienced and felt many of the things you will experience and feel in the same way...

I think we all understand this simple idea of what is involved in learning a new skill. I want to suggest that Christian faith has an essential dimension that involves learning and practicing the “skills” or disciplines or practices of faith that requires just as much patience, help, modeling, mistakes to get it right..

In fact I am not the first to notice or suggest this idea..

Back in 1976 an American theologian by the name of John H. Westerhoff, III wrote a landmark book called “Will our children have faith?” This was a pretty radical book in its time and still has something to say today. Here’s a quote from chapter one..

"It appears that as Christian faith has diminished, the schooling-instructional paradigm has encouraged us to busy ourselves with teaching about Christian religion. As our personal commitment to Christ has lapsed, many church persons have turned for solace to teaching children what the Bible says, what happened in the history of the church, what we believe, and what is right and wrong... But there is a great difference between learning about the Bible and living as a disciple of Jesus Christ." - from Chapter 1

Christian education, according to Westerhoff, has modeled itself on the schooling-instructional model of our secular schools. Instead of expecting faith formation to happen within a variety of contexts-the family, the church community, the school, and the church school-religious education has been relegated entirely to Sunday morning classes. There children learn the facts about religion, but will they learn or experience faith? How can we be communities that nourish and nurture the faith of children, instead of only teaching them facts?

Perhaps in the seventies this was the experience of some of us here today. But I would like to think that we have learn’t something about how faith is passed on and practiced. That following Jesus is about far more than just knowing some Bible verses to quote at the right time or learning the stories of the Bible.

When it comes learning to live as a follower of Christ – knowledge is important but practice is vital. I think these are two sides of the one coin. Faith is not complete without the practice of Christian disciplines and values, spirituality and worship, working for justice and arguing for peace. We need to learn to think and we need to have a working knowledge of our faith tradition and Biblical basis.

So when I think of Westerhoff’s question, “Will our children have faith?” in terms of how we are going on that score here at Westgate I think three things are important to keep in mind:

1. The Practices of our faith are key

I know I go on about this a lot but I really think that the approach to Christian education and faith formation that is known as the Practices of our Faith is touching on something very real and relevant to us here at Westgate.

There is a website for youth that is devoted to the Practices called Way to Live.org and this is how it introduces what Christian Practices are all about:

Way to Live is about a way to live that is full of the kind of freedom and love and courage that Jesus lived and gave to his community. Qualities like these are not just feelings. They are related to how people actually live their lives each day.

Way to Live invites you to participate in practices of Christian living. Each Christian practice can help you to live one aspect of your life in a way that is alert to God's presence and responsive to the genuine needs of all God's creatures.

Each Christian practice: (hospitality, honouring the body, keeping Sabbath, forgiveness, healing, singing our lives etc.)

is present in the activities of daily life

Appears in the Bible and in Christian communities throughout the centuries and across many cultures.

Addressess our deepest needs – not just our own wants or the things advertisers try to convince us that we need.

Is something we need to do with other people who understand and desire this practice.

Is a way of worshiping God and loving our neighbours.

Is a way of accepting and celebrating God's love for each of us.

Christian Practices add up to a way of life – a challenging path that invites us to walk with Jesus and his community toward the future God has promised, one step at a time.

The whole purpose of our mentoring program is to journey together in these practices – learn and explore together the practice of faith.. We learn by doing, hearing, seeing, thinking all together.

2. Our faith changes as we grow

Another landmark book that was published in 1981 was by an Educational psychologist James Fowler called Stages of Faith. In this book Fowler identifies what calls seven “stages of faith” or more accurately styles of faith that are common at different stages of our human development.

When you read these stages you can identify with the experience of many of them. But there is something interesting that you pick up when you look at the patterns he describes.

Early Childhood (2-7) Before the advent of logical thinking, the imagination of the child is able to roam free as a bird. Stories stimulate, rituals and symbols fascinate. This is a time of profound feelings and emotions. It is also the time for constructing those guiding master-images of good and evil, of life and death, of protection and threat, with which the human being begins the long journey into conscious faith.

Mid life and beyond: Life is seen no longer in black and white terms, but rather as a combination of “this and that”. “Both/and” replaces “either/or”. One embraces the polarities of life: joy and sadness, health and sickness, even life and death. Paradox now reveals itself as the key to making sense of life. Reality requires many rather than one single interpretation. The rediscovery of the power of symbol, story, metaphor and myth involves a reawakening of the child-like qualities of an earlier period, and leads the middle-aged person into a deeper appreciation of the mystery of truth.

Us mid-lifers need to remember that the L-Platers in faith may not think the way we do now – may not have had as much practice as us - may not take for granted the way we now experience life and God and Church and the Bible.

You young people need to remember the L-Plate adults are still learning too and that you have something real to give and contribute to the whole congregation.

But something Fowler observes here as a real human experience is found in the simple but profound wisdom of Jesus in the reading we read out of Mark. That is that it is in the end the experiences of childlike innocence, trust and feeling of the story that can lead us to truth.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it

3. The Child in us never dies

As we learn together, as we practice together we discover that something special happens. Our young people are drawn into an integrity of Christian faith that can transform their lives and we adults are drawn into the vigour and life that you young people have to give to the whole community.

So, the model of the car may change but the principle and practice of learning to drive is passed on from generation to generation. And just like a car license doesn't mean you are now a perfect driver so we need to continue to learn from each other.

I'll finish by quoting one of those anonymous quotes that you often see on those posters you buy in card shops, but this one has some truth and wisdom in it..

Youth is not a time of life - it is a state of mind, it is a temper of the will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions, a predominance of courage over timidity, of the appetite for adventure over love of ease.

Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old only by deserting their ideals. Years wrinkle the skin, but to give up enthusiasm wrinkles the soul. Worry, doubt, self-distrust, fear and despair - these are the long, long years that bow the head and turn the growing spirit back to dust.

Whether they are sixteen or seventy, there is in every being's heart the love of wonder, the sweet amazement at the stars and starlike things and thoughts, the undaunted challenge of events, the unfailing childlike appetite for what is to come next, and the joy and the game of life.

You are as young as your faith, as old as your doubt; as young as your self-confidence, as old as your fear, as young as your hope, as old as your despair. When the wires are all down and all the innermost core of your heart is covered with the snows of pessimism and the ice of cynicism, then you are grown old indeed.

But so long as your heart receives messages of beauty, cheer, courage, grandeur and power from the earth, from man and from the Infinite, so long you are young.

~ Author Unknown ~