

Forming Faith

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This morning we celebrate our call to life-long spiritual faith formation and recognize those who are commissioned to the ministry of teaching at Oak Grove this year. As it was in the beginning, and shall evermore be, throughout generations, the faithful have found new and innovative, adaptive and, sometimes, covert ways to share the story of God's liberating love for all people.

Last week, just prior to our drive-through Rally Day, I asked one of our wonderful Sunday school teachers, Laura, if she was going to meet with the children like "regular" on Sunday. Immediately she responded, "Um which part of our meeting since March as been regular?"

I think that sums it up!

These aren't regular times. While the method of forming faith may look different in every age and circumstance, God's message of love and justice is as true, consistent, challenging and relevant as it's always been.

This morning we'll read from the book of Deuteronomy, Moses' final and longest sermon ever to his people. Deuteronomy tells the story of the people of Israel, bringing their history to life. The history is drawn from the well of lived experience even while laying groundwork for a moving-forward faith. Remember that though Moses led the people out of Egypt, but he never lived in the Promised Land. He laid the foundation for the future generations of Israel.

Listen for how the words in this text encourage an integration of the Word of God into our everyday lives. The author is saying, "Look folks, this stuff is too important to leave up to chance. Moses understands that belief doesn't reside only in the brain – it's a whole body experience.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV)

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.* ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem* on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. AMEN

Can't you just imagine our faith ancestors sitting around the fire of an evening, gazing with wonder at the heavens, lit with stars...and sharing stories about God and God's amazing works. About how God spoke the cosmos into being, and promised old man Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as those stars in a dark sky and his wife Sarah, laughed. About the big flood and the brilliant rainbow.

Biblical stories, and stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs were passed from generation to generation – through wars, through plague, famine, exile, and diaspora. They were repeated and sung until they lodged in the hearts and minds of God's people, forming an identity. Family story telling was the earliest form of faith formation that continues to this day as we continue to re-tell the stories. We are part of this faith family!

Jesus inherited this kind of teaching and, as a boy, he would have received more formal religious teaching.

In his ministry, Jesus used “show and tell” to teach! His stories and actions show us who God is and who we can be. His stories, teachings and miracle made the authorities squirm, confounded others, but ultimately inspired, comforted and empowered regular humans to know themselves and others as God's beloved.

In a short passage from Matthew 13, listen to how Jesus uses different metaphors and images in order to convey something indescribable as God's kingdom, yet what we pray for each week in the Lord's Prayer. Also, pay attention to how he places a very practical importance on learning.

Matthew 13: 44-52, The Message, selected verses

⁴⁴ “God's kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidentally found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic—what a find!—and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field.

⁴⁵⁻⁴⁶ “Or, God's kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything and buys it.

⁵¹ Jesus asked, “Are you starting to get a handle on all this?”

They answered, “Yes.”

⁵² He said, “Then you see how every student well-trained in God's kingdom is like the owner of a general store who can put his hands on anything you need, old or new, exactly when you need it.”

Each new generation of the faithful must make their own way and adapt to new circumstances that equip disciples for a new world. Forming faith takes a lifetime and God's classroom is the world. If we allow it, the spirit speaks to us in every encounter with nature, every person we love and lose, every time we make a mistake, read poetry, learn something new from history or listen to a piece of music that makes us feel. As complex, adaptive organisms, humans are capable of learning and growing the span of our lifetime.

And while the integration of faith growth happens in multiple spaces and places, the stories of Jesus, the formative experiences of corporate worship, Bible Study, outreach and ministry are grounded in our church community.

What we do here matters.

The practice of Sunday school as we know it has its roots in the late 18th century in England, where the Sunday school movement was started for poor children to learn to read. During the industrial revolution, children were spending days working in factories. Sunday was their only day off, and the Anglican evangelist, Robert Raikes started the schools. Apparently, the Presbyterians held schools as well – Presbyterians have always placed a high value on education, so it makes sense. Within decades, the movement spread to the US and over the years, the shift from teaching reading and writing went to sharing theology and morality, always using the Bible as the primary text. Sunday school was the church's biggest form of evangelism for years. At Oak Grove, our VBS has been one of our biggest outreach events, with well over half of all participants coming from the community and with friends of Oak Grovers.

Meanwhile, in the Antebellum south in the 1800's, slaves risked their lives to meet together in secret in the "hush harbor" The hush harbor, also known as a brush harbor or a bush arbor, was a secluded, informal place in the woods, set in places away from master's eyes. In these worship experiences, slaves worshipped and created meaningful practices that were grounded in Jesus' true gospel of liberation and mixed with old spiritual practices from home. This was different from what they would have heard on Sunday from a white preacher, where Christianity promoted slavery and submission to the master as God's law.

Fast forward and in the 1980's and 90's, after years of this school model, the church embraced the truth that children learn in various ways and many churches, including ours, started teaching a rotation model, appealing to multiple intelligences. This is when we started teaching Bible stories and theology through cooking, art, music, building Legos, digging dandelions, creating peep dioramas. We even did some of this for adults, too.

I have always known that authentic faith is caught, rather than taught. Faith formation is about knowing and being known, about growing into the fullness of who we are created by God to be.

Relationship is the heart of our faith formation at Oak Grove.

Relationship with God, one another, the earth, the stranger, even ourselves.

Jesus, the master teacher, offers us a model and mentor for growing faith – meeting people where they are, sharing stories that reveal the presence of God within our midst. He is showing us what justice, courage, and belovedness looks like. In the passage we read, Jesus says that study of the kingdom will be like owning a general store and being able to put one’s hands on just what’s needed – old or new. That sounds like resilience and flexibility while being grounded in a faith tradition, able to face difficulties and challenges. And speaking of mentors, on the weekend when we remember Ruth Bader Ginsberg as well as Steve St. Martin, I think of those whose faith and work made a difference in my life and made this world a better place.

I ask you now to picture someone who was a mentor or model of faith in your life. We will take just a moment now to give thanks silently for that person. (Moment of silence.)

Any way you look at it, we are in a time of crisis. By definition, a crisis is a time when we must make decisions – it is a crossroads. We are not as we were, but we are also not what we will be.

When the pandemic closed in-person gatherings at Oak Grove, it took very little time for our leaders to adapt opportunities for interaction through zoom, conference calls, DVD’s of the service, increased telephone and mail contact. (Shout out to our sound/light/video people who tirelessly work to bring worship each Sunday.)

What I have seen is children as young as 3 and as old as upper 80’s adapting to new ways of being in community.

Right now, our Sunday morning faith formation classes, Circle, Bible Study, Wow for all ages, meetings, grief groups – all meet in some form or fashion on zoom. The choir got together – distanced and outside – to say hello. We've hosted a car wash, a drive-thru party for families, and a Car Rally. The youth have watched movies outside and done a socially distanced bonfire.

It isn't perfect. And we so appreciate your thoughtfulness and flexibility as we adapt and continue to find ways to learn and grow and to be together. We are not called to perfection, but to loving God with our hearts, mind, and strength, and showing that love to our children. We are called to faithfulness.

Even now, God is alive and at work in our hearts, deepening our faith. As we get together each week, we are reminding one another of the beauty and love that exist in the world. We lament the loss of life due to violence, unjust systems, natural disasters and climate change. We express our frustrations and concern over distance learning and politics and wondering what happens next. And yet...

We are encouraged by God's word, taught and proclaimed throughout the generations, reminding us of the hope found in Jesus. Reminding us that *even now*, we are loved, we are called to nurture the tiniest seed of faith, that it might grow as big as a mustard bush, or a giant pearl or move a mountain. We do it for ourselves, our children and their children. We do it for the One we call love, who leads the way.

May it be so. AMEN