

The First Baptist Church, Midland  
Mark 4:26-34  
August 28, 2011

***It's All About Growing: The Value of Christian Education***

A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick

Theme: Spiritual Formation

Author Helene Hanff tells of her first trip to New York City more than 40 years ago. She was to be there for a year because it had been her good fortune to win a playwriting contest and a generous fellowship was the result.

However, Hanff said her stay sponsored by the Theater Guild was colored by the guild's previous experience with a couple of the contest winners. They had come to the big city, taken their fellowship money, and then wandered off on their own paying little attention to the wishes or the provisions of the guild. The training they were supposed to receive went by the wayside, and now the guild was determined that it would not happen again. And to assure that it wouldn't there was great regimentation for Hanff's class. You know how the pendulum always swings in reaction to a bad experience.

Now many years later, Hanff was reflecting upon her time in New York. She said there were seminars laid end to end. On top of that, over the course of the year they went to all the plays on Broadway and took lessons in how to produce, write, act and direct. And when the year was up everybody agreed it was a great success. The only problem was that not one of those students ever became a Broadway playwright. And oh, the two other writers who had been given their money only to go wandering off on their own with no training... well, I suppose you could say that Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller went on to do okay in their chosen careers.

Isn't growth a funny thing? Sometimes it seems incomprehensible because we can never fully understand how or when a person will develop. As this story seems to suggest, some of us need structure while others thrive on their freedom. Our learning unfolds in many different ways and this includes the way we learn about our faith. And here is the exciting news. There is a spiritual hunger running rampant in our society that is crying to be fed.

Our postmodern culture today is being called entheogenic which means "the birth of the divine within." There is a massive soul search going on... a huge quest for spirituality identity. As sociologist Wade Clark Room puts it, there is a "widespread turning inward across the land."

Isn't that exciting? Yet it is also challenging because it is up to us to build the dining room where these hungers will be satisfied. For the hard news in all of this is that hungry people will oftentimes go anywhere to be fed and that is happening, too. People today are eager to believe in anything and everything... mind reading, astrology, witches,

ESP, crystals, spells, you name it and it has a following. That's why we must do all we can to see that our truth as a Christian people emerges.

Many of you will remember that eleven years ago we embraced a very aggressive journey designed to discern our sense of vision and to define clearly our core values. It was a lot of fun and through the years it has been very helpful. For example, at that time it clearly emerged that Christian Education is highly treasured in our church and we described this core value in these words... *We are a congregation seeking to grow. We come to the Lord Jesus Christ offering our minds as well as our hearts. Our conviction is that people of faith must be Biblically literate and theologically grounded.* You see, this is fundamentally important to our maturity as Christian people because unless we are properly grounded it is impossible to, with integrity, do our part in helping to bring to life the Kingdom of God.

Then recently... in fact just about year ago... we started another journey to clearly assess where we are at this time with our educational ministry, especially as it relates to our children. And growing out of this experience, we created a vision for our work with the kids which is rooted in our overall vision. I love it. It says... *In the spirit of our compassionate Christ, children at First Baptist Church experience love (heart), enjoy learning (head), and desire lifelong spiritual growth (hands).* You see, it is designed to touch the heart... the head... and the hands of our little ones. Yes, spiritual formation is still a high priority because we want our children... no, we want everyone to be well acquainted with what it means to be part of the Kingdom of God.

Now we know this kingdom we're talking about was initiated by Jesus. Remember when he said at the very beginning of his ministry "**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the good news.**" (Mark 1:15)? Well, if this kingdom is going to grow it is dependant upon you and me, for we are in a partnership with God to enhance and to help breathe life into this world of ours which is crying out for its *spiritual formation*.

Through the years, the church has invested a lot in this task of education, and most of us affirm how incredibly important it is to provide faith-centered learning opportunities. And I hope you will take note when I say that today more than ever this is not just a requirement for children. All of us at every age need to be engaged in an on-going process of spiritual formation if we are going to save the church. For the future of the called out community is dependant upon transformed adults who are changed, gifted, called and equipped to care for the spiritual needs of our culture.

A long time ago, Abraham Lincoln put it well. He said, "Children are going to carry on what you have started. They are going to sit where you are sitting, and when you are gone, attend to those things which you think are important. You may adopt all the policies you please, but how they are carried out depends on them. They will assume control of your cities, states, and nations. They are going to move in and take over your churches, schools, universities and corporations. All your books are going to be judged,

praised, or condemned by them. The fate of humanity will be in the hands of today's children."

So, what are we going to do about this hard pressing reality? Well, we're going to do the best we can to help our children, and in the process to help ourselves be responsible and dutiful citizens within the Kingdom of God. And toward this end, we must look to the one who leads the way... Jesus himself.

Do you remember how seriously he took the call to spiritual formation? At the tender age of twelve he was drawn to the synagogue? Only he wasn't there solely to learn... he was there to inspire as well. For as we know, he was an extremely gifted educator.

Our Lord had a wonderful ability to speak simply and clearly making his point in ways people could quickly identify. How profoundly this has been illustrated this morning through the scripture lesson. By taking a simple story, he brought spiritual truth to life. He illustrated how God is to be found in the common experiences which surround us daily. Put another way, he taught us how to take the ordinary and make it extraordinary, spiritually speaking.

Through these two stories or parables of the growing seed and the mustard seed he taught us that *within the Kingdom of God, growth is a mysterious steady process that takes place here on earth and ultimately in heaven!* He taught us that *when properly nurtured our spiritual development is inevitable.*

Put another way, when you put that seed in the ground and day by day give it the attention it needs, it is going to grow. This is the miracle and the wonder of life. And this is the way it is with the Kingdom of God as it matures within one's heart. We cannot stop its growth. Now listen to me on this one... *If you begin with Jesus Christ you will end with Jesus Christ.*

Now where does all of this bring us? We have arrived at the start of a new season for learning. Changes are unfolding all about... a new schedule is in place which will hopefully enhance the learning opportunities especially for our children. This is where our real focus rests this morning. And I have to be honest and say there is cause for concern. And it is interesting to note, that it is not a concern we endure alone. It is a growing and frightening reality which is unfolding in most of our churches.

It is sad to say that the level of indifference religious education takes in the lives of children and their parents is growing. And it doesn't make sense. Even though our elected leaders are sadly making horrible decisions which are dismantling our public education system, there is still a strong scrutiny and concern directed toward our children's secular education. This is good and necessary. However, so many families today are seemingly incapable of caring about what happens on Sunday mornings with the religious education of their kids.

What will happen as we look down the road? Where will our values be found if we allow our little ones to grow without being exposed to the wonderful stories and to the profound truths of our Christian heritage? It's not a pretty picture and that's why we have to do something right now to help prevent such a frightening scenario from unfolding.

As I see it, there are two things that must be done immediately. First, parents need to take seriously the fact that religious education doesn't happen just one hour a week on Sunday morning. It is a systemic value that is built into the way we live our lives in our homes every day. And growing out of that value is a commitment to see to it that our little ones are exposed to the concept of learning in community beyond their homes. That's where Sunday School comes into the picture. We grow together as we learn to play together and laugh together and learn together. The church becomes a sacred and valued place when our children are drawn into meaningful relationships with each other and with the influential adults around them.

The second thing that needs to be done immediately rests upon the shoulders of every one of us and it has to do with our call to be a nurturing community. Our kids can't grow and develop and learn if there are not committed Christian adults in their lives working intentionally to model their faith and teach their beliefs to the next generation. It goes without saying that religious education cannot happen without you. I dare say there is some way for every person in this sanctuary to be engaged with the care and teaching of our children. And if we would all do our part, religious education would thrive.

But sadly that's not happening. One of the other painful realities of our day is that people seem to be too busy to volunteer their time to nurture the kids spiritually. By assuming that someone else will get it done, we're finding that no one else is doing it.

Folks, we have an exciting curriculum for our children, incredible leaders who are willing and ready to train and encourage volunteers, beautiful facilities in which to learn, and children who are eager. But very few are stepping forward to say, *Please, let me be part of their lives.*

I'm speaking from my heart to you today. You know well by now that I am not the kind of pastor who berates people and motivates by guilt. I don't believe in that and I hate it when someone comes at me with that kind of motivation. But I'm honestly letting you know we are facing a challenge and we're needing you to step forward to simply say, *Yes, help me to help the little ones in our midst. I want to help them find their way to a living relationship with God and a loving relationship with Jesus Christ. And I want them to be able to someday look back and remember my name as one who touched them and loved them along the way.*

At the close of worship today, our children's leadership team is going to be available and they are going to be encouraging you to sign on to help in some way. Please don't say "no" when the opportunity comes. If enough of us are willing to do something, then the few don't have to do everything.

A long time ago, Paul put it like this in his letter to the Philippians: **“I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”**

We are all needing to share in the gospel with the one who has begun a good work among us... Jesus Christ. I hope you will be part of the excitement that is Christian Education and spiritual formation. It is a new day. Old models clearly aren't working anymore. It's time for all of us to do something. Remember: *when the grain is ripe... the harvest will come!*

Amen and AMEN!