

1 October 2017

Intentional Faith Formation Hebrews 5:11-6.2

The Book of Hebrews was written in educated Greek – far more literary than the rest of the New Testament. But that didn't keep its educated author from using some very down-to-earth imagery. We read Hebrews chapter 5, verse 11, through chapter 6, verse 2.

¹¹About this we have much to say that is hard to explain, since you have become dull in understanding. ¹²For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food; ¹³for everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. ¹⁴But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.

6:1 Therefore let us go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, ²laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.

It's an interesting analogy: you should be eating meat, but you still need milk. It's kind of a way to tell people, "You're a bunch of babies" without actually saying so. But it's effective. In fact, it's so good that Paul uses it, too, over in 1 Corinthians 3. And, when you have an analogy used twice by different authors, it's probably worth examining more closely.

What's the distinction between milk and meat here? Well, milk is a great diet for babies. It's nutritious and has the fat content that babies need for brain development. It's perfect for their needs. Besides, babies couldn't handle solid food anyway. They don't have teeth. In fact, milk is necessary to help them grow strong teeth. So, in the analogy, the baby is like a new Christian, who needs to master certain foundational principles before moving on to harder stuff. What foundational principles? The author describes them in the last part of our reading: *repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.* To simplify that: we must turn away from our old lives to have faith in God, who loves us and has adopted us in baptism, who has a purpose for us, who has granted us eternal life through Christ's resurrection, and who, in the end, will right all wrongs. That's the foundation, and as far as I'm concerned, it's a great summary. As Christ-followers, that's our start.

But meat is different from milk. For instance, it takes some effort. You have to cook it. You have to cut it into bite-sized pieces. You have to chew it, even though sometimes bits get stuck in your teeth, and sometimes there's even gristle in there that you have to spit out. The author seems to be saying, "Now that you've got the foundation down, you're ready to move on to the harder stuff, difficult questions, problems that require some effort. But you aren't. You're like adults still living on a milk diet. Grow up. You bunch of babies."

This month I've been preaching on the purposes of the Church, and most of us would agree that one purpose of the church is to teach faith. But not just the basics over and over. We should be pushing people outside their comfort zones to confront hard questions, and that's not

something that many churches do very well. One of the books that has been most influential to me in my ministry is *Stages of Faith*, by James Fowler. In this book, Fowler uses developmental psychology to describe what an appropriate faith might look like for a preschooler, a child, an adolescent, and an adult. Because faith grows and changes, like the rest of us. We develop emotionally and intellectually and psycho-socially, and our faith should develop, too. At one point, Fowler notes – almost as an aside – that most American churches operate at about the level appropriate for a ten to fifteen year old. Bluntly, the faith most of us teach is not an adult faith. That’s a startling comment. If he’s right – and I suspect he is – that would help explain why so many young people disappear from church after youth group: because they sense they’ve outgrown their church. Maybe this is why so many people think it’s impossible to be intelligent, educated, and thoughtful *and* a Christian: because they haven’t met anyone like that. Maybe this is why so many students “lose their faith,” in seminary: because seminaries take on hard questions, and nothing in those students’ prior church experience has prepared them to do that. I get it that we need to affirm the basics, but at some point we’ve got to move past them, too. And when I say “we” at this point I mean “me”: me and every other teacher in the church. I have a friend from Baptist days who still corresponds with me sometimes when he has theological questions, and once he wrote, “Sometimes I think pastors only have two sermons: (1) you ought to get saved and (2) you ought to be doing more for the church.” Yeah, I think there’s more to our faith than that.

Now before going on, I need to stress one thing. When I say we need to confront difficult subjects, I’m not just talking about complex intellectual, theological, and philosophical questions. I happen to enjoy that stuff, but some of the smartest and most courageous thinkers I know just roll their eyes at abstract theological distinctions. (You know who you are.) And this is fine. There is more than one kind of intelligence, and every sort has its basic, foundational stuff and its more difficult, meaty, stuff. So when I talk about hard questions, I don’t just mean academic questions like how to reconcile difficult Bible passages or explain the Trinity. I also mean questions like “How do you deal with addiction?” or “What do you say to someone whose child has died?” or “How does one recover from abuse, or abandonment, or betrayal?” Easy answers don’t work here, either. These questions, too, require hard work.

This is why faith formation in a church – growing up to face hard questions and hard times – is not just about offering classes. On the insert in your bulletin this week I asked you about times when you felt you had grown in faith, and I’m going to bet that most of you end up saying that you grew most through experience or crisis: after the accident or after the divorce or after your child’s diagnosis. Intentional faith formation in a church is not just what we do in our formal classrooms but it’s what we do in our one-on-one relationships, walking beside people in grief or other times when their world feels as if it’s fallen apart. More than anything, it’s what we learn through mentoring and experience and example.

All the same, one part of the church’s task *is* to take on the hard intellectual questions, questions that too often churches prefer to sweep under the rug. Questions like: Why doesn’t God stop all the injustice in the world? Why do evil people prosper? How can we call the Bible the inspired word of God – there’s some really disturbing stuff in here! Or what does Jesus mean by “no one comes to the Father but through me?” Does that mean only Christians go to heaven?

Does God-Is-Love really send a child from Shandong Province to burn in hell for eternity because she's never heard of Jesus? Is there really a hell? Why?

Maybe you've had some of these questions before. Maybe you've had others. If so, there's a chance you've never heard preachers or teachers in church deal with them. Or, worse, you've only heard them brought up to be dismissed with an glib and unsatisfactory answer. Well, as the primary teacher in this church, this one is on me, so here's my promise: we aren't going to side-step these questions. We *will* look at them. That doesn't mean that I'm going to give you the answers, though. This is for two reasons: first, because I don't have the answers. And second, because it's not about answers, anyway. It's about chewing over the questions for yourself. In that effort, in that struggle, our faith is formed. And church ought to be a place where that happens, where we move past the liquid diet of easy answers and face a world that requires more than that.

Last March, when the announcement was made to my former congregation that I was being sent here, one of the members there, Pat, went to get his three year old son Frankie from the nursery. While there, he told the nursery worker the news of my reappointment. She asked, as you would expect, "Do we know who they're sending us instead?" Pat said, "No, we don't know yet." At that point, Frankie looked up and said, "Maybe someone who knows about God."

So, yeah. Frankie was looking for an upgrade. And it's probably good for you to know up front what you ended up with here. Sorry about that. But here's the thing: the fact that I don't understand everything is no reason not to ask questions. And we will. I promise you that. Amen.