

LIKE A CHILD

II KINGS 5:1-14

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost | June 21, 2020

Community CRC, Kitchener ON

Sisters and brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ, I want to explore with you, in this final sermon as your pastor, a tension in the scriptures that I find fascinating. On the one hand, we have throughout both the Old and New Testaments these exhortations to the people of God that are based on the fifth commandment: honour your father and your mother, that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. A commandment that—in the Heidelberg Catechism and historical Christian teachings—gets broadened and extended to mean that we respect, honour, and submit to those in authority over us, and use the authority God has given us over others in ways that please God and bear witness to his kingdom of justice and peace in the world. These exhortations are all through scripture, from the Ten Commandments, the Psalms and Proverbs, and the Prophets of the Old Testament to the the letters of the Apostles in the New Testament. Children, honour your parents, respect your elders, submit to authority; and parents, elders, leaders, teach the young, train up the youth, lift up the humble. “Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord” (Col. 3:20). “My son, listen to your father’s instruction, and do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls” (Heb. 13:17). “Listen to your father, who gave you life, and do not despise your mother when she is old” (Prov. 23:22). “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not go astray” (Prov. 22:6). Scripture is clear. Parents, teach your children. Children, learn from your parents. Elders, teach the youth. Young people, respect your elders. In the powerful words of Psalm 145, “One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts” (Psalm 145:4).

When I started out in ministry, this was probably my operative mode of faith formation. And maybe that’s ironic, that a twenty-something, wet-behind-the-ears, single, childless pastor came into ministry with the conviction that faith was something passed down from the old to the young, that faith was something adults had that youth needed, something that parents had that they shared with their children. In my imagination,

intergenerational faith-formation was a one-way street. The old to the young. The elders to the youth. Parents to their children.

And with that mindset, I plunged myself wholeheartedly into Community CRC's commitment to intergenerational ministry—helping to develop and launch and teach Dive into Doctrine, our intergenerational catechism class; coming up with intergenerational activities and workshops for Communities and small groups; going along on the intergenerational service trip to New Jersey; accompanying elders on profession of faith and baptism visits. I was so excited to help facilitate and be a part of these opportunities to build relationships between elders and youth, old and young, because I was convinced that this was the future of Christian ministry. I was convicted—this was how the church was going to not just survive, but thrive in the coming years, by developing meaningful relationships between the generations for people to pass down their faith.

And I still think that. But I think it differently now, because here's the other side of this tension that I'm exploring here. (Remember? We're exploring a tension in scripture together?) One the one side of this tension is the exhortation throughout scripture for the young to honour their elders and for the elders to raise up the youth; but on the other side of this tension we have the teachings of Jesus, repeated throughout the gospels, that if anyone wants to enter the Kingdom of Heaven they must become like a child.

“At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?’ Jesus called a little child to him, and placed the child among them, and said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven’” (Mat. 18:1-3).

“People were bringing babies to Jesus for him to bless them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it’” (Luke 18:15-17).

Jesus drops this teaching like a bomb, surrounded by language that makes us perk up and pay attention. Jesus' disciples are trying to keep the sanctuary quiet, shushing the kids and asking the young mothers to take their babies to the nursery so that the grown folk can focus on the Word of the Lord, and Jesus rebukes, not the noisy, distracting children, but

the disciples. “I tell you the truth” he says. And he hits the point home by making it a salvation issue—a matter of life and death—unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Parents teach your children, become like a child. Elders raise up the youth, become like a child. This is the tension I’ve been sitting in for the past while.

And this is where I find the Naaman story rings so powerfully. The Naaman story helps us navigate this tension. Because in this story, we have a grown man of power and prestige, a man who has been blessed by the Lord, a man of honour and authority. But this man is sick, and he wants to be healed. He has everything a man could ask for, all the power one man can hold, and yet he is powerless over the illness that corrupts his flesh. Naaman is great. Naaman is proud. Naaman is powerful. Naaman is mighty. Naaman expects to be received by the King of Israel, who will summon the Prophet of God, who will raise his hands over the mighty general and command the storehouses of heaven to pour forth their blessing, and Naaman is all ready to do great feats of faith to earn his healing, to pray a thousand prayers and sing a thousand songs and memorize a thousand verses and sacrifice a thousand bulls on a thousand hills. But none of this leads to his healing. To find healing, Naaman the Proud must learn to listen to the voices of those who are beneath him—a slave, a girl, a servant, a foreigner, a child. To find healing, Naaman the Great must do things that are beneath him—speak with servants, travel here and there, wash himself in a dirty old river, in a muddy brook.

But once he lays aside his pride, once he humbles himself, listens to the words of servants and slaves and children, once he bathes, the text tells us, his skin became clean and smooth, like a child.

The Naaman story turns my thinking about intergenerational ministry on its head. The Naaman story teaches me the same thing that this church has taught me: that intergenerational faith formation is not a one-way street, it’s symbiotic. Mutually beneficial. Faith is not something that the old pass down to the young. It is a gift from God that we all share with each other, young and old, elders and youth, parents and children. The youth, our children, the infants we baptize—they are not the future of the church. They are the church. We are the church. Together.

Christians preachers and theologians throughout history have interpreted Naaman's story as a kind of shadow of the baptism of Jesus, and a foretaste of the transforming power that is given to us, the followers of Jesus, in our baptism. Many years after Naaman washes in the waters of the Jordan, our Lord, Jesus Christ, went down into the waters himself to fulfill all righteousness, and the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended like a dove and a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased."

It's a common saying in protestant circles, attributed to Billy Graham, that "all are equal at the foot of the cross." And I think we see that truth expressed so profoundly in the powerful sacrament of baptism, this means of grace that God has given us to mark us as his children and pour out on us the promises he makes to us in his holy Word. All are equal in the waters of this fountain. No matter how old or wise or smart or rich or powerful or successful we are, we come to these waters to be washed clean, to be made new, to become like little children. When we emerge from these waters, no matter our age, no matter our station, no matter our office, we emerge as children of God, and as brothers and sisters of Christ, and of each other. And we see this paradox, this tension, in our baptismal liturgy. On the one hand, the parents of a baptized child make their vow to raise up this child in the faith; and on the other hand, we all make a vow to embrace this child as our sister, our brother in Christ. A mutual embrace. An embrace, already in infancy, of equals, of siblings, of peers.

The Pharisee Nicodemus, in the Gospel of John, asks Jesus "How can someone be born again when they are old?" And Jesus answers, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

And Nicodemus replies: "How can this be?" (John 3)

Because this is one of the great mysteries of our faith, one of those paradoxes that we hold to and try to live into in our stumbling human way—that in the upside-down and inside-out economy of God's Kingdom, to become rich we must become poor, to become wise we must become fools, to become truly alive we must die to ourselves, and to become mature we must become like a little child. This means that even as we teach our children the

ways of faith, our children are teaching us the ways of faith. As we teach our children what it means to love and serve the Lord, our children teach us what it means to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, how to become like a child, how to live joyfully in an enchanted world, trusting the goodness of God, genuine and curious in our pursuit of obedience and understanding, praising the Lord with abandon for his goodness and mercy.

And we have learned this together, in so many ways, you and I.

I remember a parent, in 2016, who brought his children to Dive into Doctrine so they could learn about the Belgic Confession. This parent intended to drop off his kids and head over to Tim's to grab a coffee and get some work done, but after walking his kids inside and making sure they were all set to go, his kids turned to him and said, "Dad, there's a class for adults, too. You should stay." And he did. The next week he brought his wife, and for the next month, they spent their family dinners sharing their learnings, their questions, and their wonderings about faith, scripture, and what it meant to be Reformed.

I remember an elder, in 2017, who had just completed a Profession of Faith visit to a young adult, and who called me afterwards to share with a trembling voice the joy that he felt in that young woman's story of faith, and how he didn't realize until that moment that he had forgotten what it felt like to put his hope and faith and joy in the Lord.

I remember children's messages where I'm sure I was schooled more than any of the children. One I remember in particular was at this baptismal font, on a baptism Sunday, and y'all know how I go on about baptism, telling the children how God marks us as his children and calls us his own and makes us a family. I remember one time when Zoe and Elsa were standing here, and I think I tried to explain something about how we are given a new name, but it went totally over everyone's head, even some adults, and Zoe and Elsa were just giving me this smirk like, "That didn't work, Pastor John, but we know what you were trying to say." And it reminded of God's love for us, when we try so hard to earn our salvation, and I sometimes imagine God with that same kind of smirk looking down saying, nice try, but I've got this.

There was another baptism Sunday children's message where I talked to long and my dear friend Nicholas tried to rebaptize me. The sheer joy of that moment overwhelmed me and reminded me of how God invites us to play and rest in the safety of his grace.

And just a couple of weeks ago, as Darlene and I led a preparatory class for children who were preparing to come to the Lord's Table, a parent reached out to me afterwards to tell me about a moment she had with her young daughter, as we were walking through the story of Jesus' baptism, and we got to the part where God speaks from heaven and says "This is my Son, whom I love." And her daughter was confused because Jesus is God, so how can God be talking from heaven while Jesus is in the water? And so this mother explained to her daughter that yes, Jesus is God, and the Father is God, and the Holy Spirit that comes down like a dove is also God. And her daughter thought about that for awhile, and then said: "So Jesus is God, and the Father is God, and the Holy Spirit is God." Which is practically a quote from the Athanasian Creed! And I was reminded again how scripture is so simple that a child can understand it, and yet so profound that the wisest philosopher cannot begin to comprehend it.

People of God, when I came to this church I came with Psalm 145 as a kind of theme passage for worship, and particularly verse 4. Psalm 145 is a corporate song of praise to God for his goodness, faithfulness, majesty, and love, and in verse 4 the psalmist writes: "One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts. They speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty—and I will meditate on your wonderful works." This psalm is still a visionary psalm for me when it comes to imagining a biblical vision of the kind of worship that God desires of us, but after six years here, you have helped me to see this, not merely as the elders teaching the words and songs of faith to the youth, but as a call and response. Each generation crying out, praising the Lord, telling of his mighty deeds, of his deliverance, of his salvation; the old teaching the young and the young teaching the old what it means to faithfully follow the God who calls us all to the waters of mercy to grow mature by becoming like children.

One generation will call to the next:

"Our God is good and his hand is strong!"

All of the world sings his marvellous acts

and our voice will join with theirs in the song!

May our voices, from all generations, join together as one, to proclaim the mighty deeds of our God, who never fails to renew us when we come to him in faith.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.