

## **Growing Up at Quaker: Delightful, Secure and Pleasant**

Each year at Quaker we enjoy special moments when we take time to recognize and honor some of our young people as they move through a significant stage of life. When they first arrive to us as newborns we dedicate their lives to the Lord and, at the same time, we re-dedicate ourselves at Quaker to being the kind of church that will nurture their young faith. A few years later we set them apart once again as new schoolers; we pray over them blessing and protection as they begin their formal schooling. And then again in a few years, hopefully not too many more than 12, we celebrate their graduation from school. All along the way we try to recognize their achievements and encourage them as they grow to see their lives and abilities as a gift from the Lord to be given back to him for his glory.

At each of these celebratory times, like the one we celebrate today, I am reminded just how important a role our church plays in the spiritual development of young people. The example of our lives, the priority of our ministries, the environment of our fellowship, the emphasis of our teaching, the response to our troubles, all of this and more is absorbed and taken in by the young lives around us. It plays a not insignificant role in what kind of Christian men and women they become. It's a humbling thought isn't it? We are not unaware of our own sinfulness, our failures, our imperfections and sometimes our just plain orneriness. Yet, somehow God, in his infinite grace, works through our flawed efforts as a church family and enables our young people to grow up to be loving parents, honest workers, committed citizens and most important faithful disciples in the Kingdom.

This is nothing new of course. Since its beginning on the first century streets of Jerusalem, God has been using his Church to transform young men and women into leaders for the Kingdom. There is actually a great example of this in the New Testament. We read of a faithful church leader who we first meet as a young boy involved in a typical boyhood mishap; then we see him as an immature and unreliable disciple, and finally we see him grow up to become an invaluable Church leader. His name is John Mark. There isn't a huge amount of information on him, but what we do know outlines an intriguing story that I think appropriate to reflect on this morning.

We know a little about John Mark's life as a young boy. He was the son of a woman named Mary who was apparently a fairly prominent Jewish Widow of Jerusalem. Some think Mary's house was a frequent gathering place for the early Christians. In Acts chapter 12 we are told that when Peter was in prison, the saints were at Mary's house praying. It was likely Mary's house where the apostles and other followers were assembled when the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred on Pentecost.

Some think that Mary's house may also have had in it the upper room where Jesus and his disciples gathered for the last supper. If that is true, it might explain one of the more intriguing passages found in Mark's gospel, chapter 14. Only Mark includes the story of a young boy tagging along behind the disciples and barely avoiding capture by the Roman guards. Verse 51 reads, *A young man wearing nothing but a linen garment was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.*

Some scholars believe Mark inserted this curious little detail into his gospel as a kind of signature statement. It seems Mark was that young teenage boy who sensed the special importance of this Last Supper, or at least was curious about what was happening, and so he follows the disciples and Jesus into the garden. He was not quite old enough to take his place among the disciples but perhaps he was old enough to begin thinking he wanted to.

Well, all this involves some speculation, but one thing seems clear, Mark grew up right in the center of the Christian story. As a boy he saw and heard Jesus; he was friends with the disciples. One of those disciples, Peter, would later refer to Mark in his letters as “my son.” (1 Peter 5:13). Each week at worship he would sit by men like Peter, James and John and women like his own mother and the other two Marys, Mary Magdelene and Mary the mother of Jesus. No doubt it was the presence of such saints in his life that explains the next turn his life would take.

About 15 years after the day of Pentecost, we get details about the next major event in Mark’s life. Paul and Barnabas add a young John Mark to their missionary team as they prepare for a preaching tour of the synagogues throughout the Mediterranean world. Mark is probably selected because in addition to being Mary’s son, he is also Barnabas’ cousin (Colossians 4:10), another influential leader in his home congregation.

However, Mark does not complete the journey. Instead, not too long after starting out, Mark decides to return home. The scriptures don’t explicitly say why. In Acts chapter 13 we simply read the following. *John left them and returned to Jerusalem.* But elsewhere in the scriptures there are some hints as to what

happened. In Acts chapter 15 we read that Paul is not pleased at all with Mark's decision to leave them, actually calling it "desertion." When the time came to take a second missionary tour Barnabas and Paul apparently have a fairly heated argument about whether or not to include John Mark. Paul was opposed to including Mark on the team because of what happened on the previous trip. Why did Mark "desert" Paul on that trip? Maybe Mark got homesick. He was still a relatively young man, probably late twenties, and the missionary tour was not an easy trip, in fact it was dangerous. Mark may have gotten scared. Pamphylia, the region they were traveling in, was known as particularly dangerous territory. Some scholars think it is possible that Mark may have disagreed with Paul's teaching. It was about this time that Peter and Paul had their famous confrontation about whether non Jewish Christians should have to follow the Law of Moses. Many Jewish Christians worried that Paul was dangerously liberal and not nearly respectful enough of the sacred Law. Perhaps Mark, who was particularly close to Peter, had some of the same misgivings as did Peter and other Jewish church leaders about Paul's outreach to the Gentiles. Whatever his reasons were, Barnabas, just as he stood up for Paul to the Jewish Christians, stood up to Paul for John Mark, but to no avail. The scriptures record that Paul and Barnabas split up. Paul selected another disciple named Silas to be his mission partner; Barnabas teamed up with John Mark and the two mission teams go their separate ways.

We hear little about Mark for the next few years, but curiously, when we do hear about Mark again, in Colossians chapter four, he is once again part of Paul's missionary team. Whatever his reasons for rejecting Mark before (or Mark

rejecting Paul) it seems now they are reconciled and working together again. Mark is running errands for the imprisoned Paul. Later, in the Philemon letter, we find Paul and Mark traveling to meet with Philemon to discuss the situation of the runaway slave Onesimus. And then several years later, Paul again finds himself in prison in Rome and writes a letter to Timothy. In it he says, *Do your best to come to me quickly, for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me.* And then he makes a request of Timothy, a touching request considering the tension that once existed between Paul and Mark. Paul writes, ***Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry.*** That is quite a change from his former attitude toward John Mark.

Mark responds to Paul's request and arrives in Rome to minister to Paul at this particularly unpleasant time in Paul's life. Paul was not unaccustomed to rejection and trouble in the mission field; the Jews had always resisted his work. But now the Romans, who had for the most part been pretty tolerant of Christians, were beginning to join in the persecution. One reason for this may have been the terrible event that occurred in A.D. 64. The great city of Rome is nearly destroyed by fire. The citizens of Rome blamed Nero for the catastrophe. With his popularity tanking, Nero looks for a scapegoat and decides to blame the fire on a small, obscure little religious sect called Christians. Many people believe the accusation and persecution increases against the Christians.

Despite the increased persecution by the Romans, Mark would eventually find in Rome the work he was destined to do. Years later Mark returns to Rome,

this time with Peter (1 Peter 5:13). Peter is writing his letters to prepare the Christians for the persecution that seems inevitable for the Christians in the near future. Peter knows his time on the earth is short and feels the need to write down a record of his own life with Jesus, so he writes,

***I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. <sup>13</sup>I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, <sup>14</sup>because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. <sup>15</sup>And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. (2 Peter 1:12-15)***

Part of Peter's efforts to help us remember these things was to write his own account of Jesus' life and ministry and Mark is apparently the one taking notes, apparently right up until Peter's death. In fact some early Christians referred to Mark's gospel as "The Memoirs of Peter." Mark himself was described by at least one early church leader as the "interpreter of Peter." So, when Peter is martyred in Rome it seems that it is Mark who ultimately finished his gospel. And with this remarkable accomplishment, we come to the end of the Biblical references to the life of this young man. A young man born into a believing family; spiritually raised and nurtured in a loving and faithful congregation; influenced and shaped by godly men and women. A young man who began his own ministry early, and certainly made his share of mistakes, but continued to feel the support and encouragement of brethren. A man who ends up finding his place in the Kingdom and the work he was destined to do.

Mark had received a precious gift, a spiritual inheritance, the influence of a faithful family and a loving church. Its an inheritance I hope we as individual families and as a congregational family can give to our own young people at Quaker. It is certainly a gift I have received from this congregation and one I cherish more and more with each passing year. In some ways I can relate to John Mark's story. For one thing, I know what it is like to be raised by faithful parents and to grow up in a faithful and loving congregation.

As many of you know, when I was younger I had a drug problem. Every week my parents drug me to church, and for most of my young life the church they drug me to was this one. I came to this church in 1961 at the age of 6 years old. I know something of what the young John Mark must have felt, coming to church as a young boy each week, looking around and seeing godly men and women. My Peters and James and Marys were people like N.E. and Ruth Rhodes, Chester and Erma Dean Griffith, Kline and Leona Nall, Armand and Peggy Weathers, Herb and Mary Griffith, Ellmore and Marie Johnson, A.M. and Pauline McCorkle, Joe and Glona Henderson, Clark and Ernestine Johnson, Ed and Authula Simpson, Raldo and Pauline Meacham, L.K. and Barbara Lankford, Virgil and Lona Dell Rogers, John and Sally Watkins, just to name a few.

In addition to those great couples there were also some great women of faith who impacted my life, women like Margaret Williams, Mary Putty, Julia Hemmeline, Gladys Johnson, Elvora Allen and of course Quaker Avenue's own patron saint, Dorine Harbin. Like many young boys in church, I slept through most of the sermons but at some point in my life I began to stay awake and listen. In addition to the scores of sermons by N.E., I also remember many great preachers who would come to speak or hold gospel meetings: the Shelburnes (G. B., Gene and B.); Larry Branum; Lyndon Latham; George Gray;

Ralph Gage; Earl Cantwell; Frank Duckworth, Calvin White, Herbert Gibson; Portis Ribble; Roland Hayes, Odell Farr, Gaylon Wright, Baxter Loe, Finis Lee, Ervin Waters, W. J. Leach, Tommy Williams. I remember going to youth meetings and being moved by the preaching of men like Roland McLean, David Hutton, Don Lacy, Eddy Ketchersid, Richard Seymour, just to mention a few whose influence I acknowledge with thanksgiving. I take the time to mention all these names not just to give you information but more to give them tribute.

I don't think there is anything extraordinary about my story. Many of you, perhaps most of you could tell a similar story. There are certainly many others who have been shaped and nurtured by this church, hundreds who are now serving in various roles of leadership throughout the Kingdom, spread out over all the world who as young people were blessed by this loving congregation. Their lives and ministries today are testimony of the work done by this church in previous days.

We honor today young men and women who are about to launch out from here, some to further their education, some to begin their own careers, begin their own families, to start building on the foundation, some of which was laid here. My prayer is that they will be able to look back one day and feel the same way about the influence of this church as I do. And when I look out and see even younger boys and girls, who today have difficulty staying awake during sermons, who are wrestling with their own drug problem because they do not yet fully realize the blessing of being forcibly compelled to be here week after week after unending week, I pray that the decisions we make, the example we give, the priorities we choose will serve them well spiritually.

So, as we come again to the end of another school year, it is time again to celebrate the educational accomplishments of some of our young people. We look forward eagerly to see how the Lord will use them in the Kingdom even as we await expectantly for future young saints who will be similarly honored in years to come. And each *time* we take the *time* to remember such important *times* as these we are reminded of what a blessing it is to grow up surrounded by the people of God, to enjoy the rich and delightful inheritance that is the Church, our spiritual family. The psalmist must have felt something very similar for he said it well when he wrote in the 16<sup>th</sup> psalm,

*As for the saints who are in the land,  
they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.*

*Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup;  
You have made my lot secure.*

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places,  
Surely I have a delightful inheritance.*

This morning we congratulate our graduates and pray God's richest blessings upon them. And at the same time we pray for ourselves, that we at Quaker will always be, by the grace of God, a congregation of the kind of people in whom our young people will delight, and among whom they will feel secure and about whom they will have pleasant and delightful memories.

Dear Sirs

Thank you for your letter of February 17th. After careful consideration I regret to inform you that I am unable to accept your refusal to offer me employment with your bank.

This year I have been particularly fortunate in receiving an unusually large number of rejection letters. With such a varied and promising field of candidates it is impossible for me to accept all refusals.

Despite Your bank's outstanding qualifications and previous experience in rejecting applicants, I find that your rejection does not meet my needs at this time. Therefore I will initiate employment with your firm immediately following graduation. I look forward to seeing you then.

Sincerely, XXXXXXXXX