

How Children Learn in a Community of Faith

I occasionally think about writing a book entitled “The Parade of God’s Grace.” Each chapter in the book would center around particular experiences which God allowed in my life that helped to provide a foundation for me to understand the great doctrines of the faith I would later come to profess. Let me share with you a few examples of what I mean. Long before I had ever conscientiously read Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”, I experienced the truth of those scriptures as a 12 year old boy living in Washington D.C. in 1968. My family had developed a close relationship with an African American congregation in Glen Arden, Maryland. When Dr. Martin Luther King was murdered, mom and dad wanted to worship with those black brethren the Sunday after his death. They called and asked if it would be okay and of course our family was welcome to visit. I remember it being an extraordinarily emotional service. Two months later Senator Robert Kennedy was murdered during his presidential campaign. Again our family worshipped the following Sunday again with our black brothers and sisters following that tragedy. In that service my father was asked to give the lesson. Though I was only 12 years old it was not lost on me that something remarkable was occurring. While the nation around me was literally burning with hate and prejudice, and the multi-racial

school I attended became tense as students clustered in racially exclusive groups, in the Church I experienced a sanctuary where black and white Christians came together to love one another, weep for one another and pray for peace. I do not know if anyone actually quoted the Galatian passage in either of those services. At the time I'm quite sure I did not even know of such a passage in the Bible. But the truth of that passage was profoundly taught to me in those sacred moments of worship in 1968.

At the age of six, I know I had not yet felt the passion of our Lord's prayer in John 17 that all of those who believe in him love one another and have unity with one another, or Paul's sweet reasoning in Romans 14 encouraging brothers to not let their differences keep them from being united. But it was at the age of six that I began to learn those truths as my family carried me off to Bethany, West Virginia to a gathering of Christians from different backgrounds who shared Jesus' and Paul's passion for unity among believers. For the next several years, essentially all of my childhood and adolescence, my family took me from one side of the country to the other to all manner of unity meetings and discussions between believers who were passionately trying to overcome the issues that had divided them. I was too young to fully understand the speeches and the sermons but I saw grown men hug each other and cry and speak out with

great passion and even though I was a child I was not too young to understand that something very important was going on.

When I was eight years old my sister tragically drowned. It would be years later before I could piece together enough Scripture to begin to find some light from God that helped explain why he would allow this precious little five year old girl to be taken from me and my family. Quite frankly I am still searching for a fuller understanding of such things. But somewhere over the years I discovered Paul's words in Second Corinthians that say we are able to comfort one another with the comfort we have received. Well, I already knew that. I had seen that myself as the Church came together almost daily to comfort my family. I saw the Church arriving daily at my home with words, food, and a desire to do anything it could to give comfort. And since that dark night in January, 1964, I have seen my family, and other Church members, in the homes of others who have suffered similar tragedies comforting with the comfort they themselves had received.

What I am saying is this. Long before we are old enough to understand the great doctrines of our faith, by God's grace, we experience those truths in the community of faith we call the Church. The Church is uniquely designed by God to teach all of us his truths, especially our children. We learn best God's truths about grace, love, justice, mercy, forgiveness, obedience, servanthood, sacrifice,

holiness, praise and worship by our experience of these things in the community of faith. We learn these things better by living in community than by simply attending a class or reading a book, even the book of books. I do not mean to underemphasize the value and importance of personal study in the Word. But I would insist that when such study has not been grounded in and reinforced by our experiences in the community of faith, our understandings are very likely to be superficial if not distorted. The most powerful educational strategy of the Church isn't any particular innovative method but the penetrating impact of members experiencing a community of real, flesh and blood, righteousness.

If you are wondering how biblical what I am saying is, I rest my case on a single biblical example, the Incarnation. God has used many ways to teach us about himself throughout history. He gave us words to read in the Law and the Prophets; he provided impressive visual aids through his miraculous and mighty deeds; but none of these could have the educational punch of the Incarnation through which God gave us, in living flesh and blood, a testimony of his grace and truth. The Incarnation was God's ultimate and best methodology for teaching the world about himself as the scripture testifies. *The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth* (Jn 1:14-18)

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... The Son is the radiance of God's glory, the exact representation of his being. (Heb 1:1-3)

You might say, "Okay, fine, but the Incarnation was 2000 years ago. We live in the 21st century. We don't have an Incarnation to use for an educational methodology." You might say that, but if you said that you would be wrong! The great mystery revealed to the saints about which Paul spoke to the Colossian brethren is that Christ continues to dwell in flesh and blood, our flesh and our blood! We continue to behold his glory in each other. Our knowledge of God, of his nature and his will for us, if it is understood at all in our lives, is still best understood through experiencing the Incarnate presence of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate presence that is the Community of Faith, the Church.

I agree whole-heartedly with Rubel Shelly and Randy Harris' description of the Church as the "second incarnation" in their book of the same title. The Word of God still dwells in the flesh, still has a bodily presence in our world for you and I are the Body of Christ. We are the presence of Christ in the world, for Christ is now in us (Colossians 1:27), his attitude and will is to be in us (Philippians 2:5, 13); his power is in us (Ephesians 3:20); his wisdom is in us (1 Corinthians 3: 6-16). Not perfectly or fully in any of us individually, but truly and amazingly when we come together, when we live together as his Body.

Some are limited in their experience of Christ having access only to a written word about him, or nature's inarticulate declaration of him, but the children of the Church are blessed beyond measure to grow up in the presence of a living, breathing, fleshy Christ as they grow up in the Church, his body. Again, not a perfect presence, not nearly as exact a representation of God as was that first incarnation, but the marvelous, miraculous, mystery of the gospel is simply this. Somehow Christ is in us and that reality is our hope of glory.

It is not enough for them to grow up in Christian families because no family, not even a Christian family, constitutes the community of faith, the Body of Christ. Jesus certainly valued the family, but he also clearly taught that our relationships in the kingdom supercede and radically redefine our family relationships. Jesus said, "My mother and brother are those who hear God's Word and put it in practice" (Lk 8:21). I understand that to mean that Lisa is my sister in the Lord before she is my wife. Her first relationship, her first loyalty is to God, as is mine. That does not mean our roles as husband and wife are not important, but that they are understood in the context of the Kingdom. Actually, because of that, we will do much better jobs at being husband and wife. When I attended the Bible Institute in Houston, I roomed with my cousin. One evening as we were together in the Word and in prayer, he turned to me and shared, "It is good when cousins become brothers." We did not cease to be cousins, but our

relationship as brothers in the Lord became more important. Our children should grow up as connected to the Church as they are to their families because Christian families are even more related to Christ than they are to each other.

For some church is just an extension of one's natural family, a natural fellowship of family rather than the supernatural fellowship of the Kingdom. But the natural fellowship of family is not the incarnate presence of Christ. Only the Church is the expression of Christ to the world. Family can be an incarnate presence of Christ when its members all belong to Christ. But the fellowship of the Church is not based on family relationships, or any natural relationships, but on the common supernatural life that believers share with and in Christ. Life in Christ transcends the natural family, it can even sometimes break up the natural family. Life in Christ united people who in the natural world were separated, divided even alienated from and hostile to one another, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. Luke gives us a picture of the extraordinary fellowship of the Church. *All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere heart. (Acts 2:44-46)*

So we must ask. How accurate a description is this of us at Quaker? What constitutes our fellowship, our common life? How often do we come together

and for what reasons? Isn't it true that the majority of our time is spent away from each other? And if we try to nurture more congregational life with events that bring us together we struggle with the feeling that the church is demanding too much of our time. Of course it is not helpful to plan so many events and activities that there is hardly any meaningful time left for families to have together. Yet at the same time shouldn't much of our family time be committed to sharing our life together and accomplishing the work Christ called us to do?

One of the important reasons for the Body of Christ to come together in worship, in study, in evangelism and in service is so that our children can experience first hand, the presence of Christ as he is manifested in the community of faith. Our children need to see the Body of Christ feeding the poor, the Body of Christ comforting the sick and homeless, the Body of Christ searching the scriptures, the Body of Christ praising the Father, the Body of Christ seeking and saving the lost. They should see the Body of Christ busy doing just exactly what Christ was busy doing when he was here in the body. There is no more effective methodology in the world for teaching our children about Christ than by allowing them to see first hand the Christ at work in us. The community of faith is the lab in which Bible lessons are made real. What our children see is what they get.

We can teach our children all we want by telling them about Christ, the real impact comes when they see Christ living in us. A child's faith is nurtured in the community a child is raised. We can have children memorize the Word of God but it is at least as important for them to see the Word become flesh in us. We can tell our children all the great things the Lord did for and with his people years ago, but it will mean little unless they see the Lord continue to do great things for and with his people today. We can preach the gospel but our words will never reach our children's hearts, they will only echo in their heads, unless they see behavior in the community around them that matches their beliefs.

This last week I was invited to attend a breakfast meeting to hear the inspirational story of Dr. Tererai Trent, a Zimbabwean woman who overcame the poverty and abuse of her childhood and eventually came to America and got her doctorate degree. Her talk was inspirational, but one phrase in her talk struck me, an African saying, "I am because we are." Do you hear that? What we are as a community profoundly impacts what the children in our community become. Our life together is the soil in which these young plants grow. The faith and life of the community we grow up in gives a shape, a lean, a texture, a substance to the plant that we become. One we will either welcome and embrace or reject and resist for the rest of our lives. May Quaker always be a community of faith where children learn of Christ, his love, his grace, his call on our lives.