

Adults Needed!

Hebrews 6: 1

How do we separate out our own value system from the one we received as children? How can we know what we really value, what's really important for us, as opposed to what we were always told and taught as children? In other words, how important is it to grow up in terms of our faith and values? What does it mean to grow up in faith? How do we do it?

Is it important that we grow and change from the time we are children into, and even through adulthood? This seems to be an obvious question, but many people seem to struggle in life trying to move into adulthood without seriously examining and questioning their childhood faith and values. Others reject them almost completely and struggle to find a worthy and meaningful replacement.

When Bishop John Spong came to Kansas City a few years ago, he suggested rather forcefully that the church doesn't need people to be born again. We need people to grow up! The world needs mature and adult Christians. To grow up in faith is to take the solid values we received as children, to examine them honestly, and to find ways of making them our own. This is a vital process – absolutely essential to our becoming adults and to our being able to contribute to the dream of transforming this world in terms of God's love, justice, and peace. .

Spong did not say this to minimize the importance of change, renewal, and transformation in life. This reorientation of our selves is essentially what the Gospel means by being born again. It means being open to new insight and new perspective in a very fundamental way on the journey. His comments were to focus in a very emphatic way on the need for people of faith to mature, to grow up in terms of our faith and in our living. In this case, maturing does not just mean growing older.

The church, our society, and this world need more adults. Life needs each of us to be on the journey in such a way that we are open to our faith development toward maturity. Robert Bly, in *The Sibling Society*, wrote about the need for American culture to return to the importance of people maturing and becoming wise. Adults are needed here! He suggests with great emphasis that we've become a society of siblings – of children growing up without parents around and of parents seeking to be friends more than fathers and mothers. Where are the adults?

Our society loves and hates youth. We crown young idols, make them stars, and inundate with adulation, money, and fame. Then, we take a perverse delight in watching them crash and burn. We are media-fed and anxiety-driven. Young people, not-so-young people, businesses, and even many churches are caught up in destructive patterns, image wars, and the judgment of popular opinion. Commercial success seems to be the holy grail of life.

A sibling society has a hard time facing its real challenges. When faced with a difficult truth, it prefers to change the subject. A sibling society pushes its debt forward onto a future generation or balances its budget on the backs of those least able to complain loudly. The church of a sibling society offers simplistic answers to challenging questions and has a hard time living in

the present. It prefers, instead, to focus on the past when things were easier to understand or on the future when God will just take all the problems away and make everything perfect.

Being an adult in a sibling society means restating the difficult truth over and over and insisting that we stand up to what's wrong and stand up for what is right. Being an adult means to exercise both compassion and tough-love. It means to lead by example and to risk not being popular. Many of those attempting to be grown up – to be a non-anxious adult presence or a voice of clarity – are often swept away in the tide of what's new, what's cool, or what's really scary. How easily these efforts can be manipulated. Jesus' calls us to grow up in faith, grow up in life, because adults are needed.

What will it mean for us to be adults in our society and in the church? What will it mean for a congregation to fulfill an adult role in the world in our community, our society, and our world? It will mean, at least in part, that we take seriously the motto of one Christian denomination: "in essentials, unity; in non-essentials, freedom; and in all things, charity. We will overcome division with unity, not uniformity, and will find that unity in the essentials of faith. We will practice freedom in all that is not essential and, in everything, we will give and receive charity – love.

We are not all going to agree on how to interpret the Bible. We can't even all agree in this congregation, but if we are all part of the one mystical body, if we all really do find life within the unity of God, then there must be an essential unity we share. There are so many layers of belief, ritual, and practice that Christians have added to our faith over the centuries, by the time we finish removing them, what is left is very small – like a seed – and very precious. They are something like what Jesus taught: to love God with all our being, to love all others and we ideally love ourselves (that is, to be radically inclusive), and to love one another as Jesus loved us, enough to lay down his life for us.

A mature church in the midst of a sibling society, recognizes and remembers that community is not only a gathering of brothers and sisters under God. It spans generations – all the way back and all the way forward. Such a church knows how important it is not only to teach children information about the faith, but also to show them how to live and how to grow up. The values we offer to our children include the value of trustworthy adults. Those who will carry those core values into adulthood, must question and revisit them until they become their own values.

All human beings are product of families -- of relational systems. Whatever we get or don't get from our parents and extended family, there comes a time when we are responsible to choose what to keep, what to let go, and what new to take on. As we follow Jesus, we reach back to understand tradition as best we can. What was Jesus saying to his culture? What was God saying through Jesus? Even more important, however, it is our responsibility to interpret for our own time what it means to follow Jesus now: to take faith seriously, to take the Bible seriously, without taking ourselves too seriously.

This congregation continues to make some important choices – adult choices that we teach to our children and model for our youth. We choose to be inclusive, as radically inclusive as we can be. We choose to be church in this neighborhood, to have this building we have bought be an

outward and visible sign of our inward and spiritual commitment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. We have chosen to promote freedom with all its dangers and to be community with all its restrictions. We choose to worship dynamically and interactively – to celebrate wildly and sit quietly. We choose to focus on asking and inviting honest questions – ones we ask out loud right in church.

We choose to trust that the answers that will transform our lives are the ones we discover on the journey together. We choose to seek growth over comfort, mystery over certainty, and unity over uniformity.

We are “in a privileged position, ...links with the past and, at the same time, seeds of the future, but the seeds have to fly with the wind, to go with the Spirit, in order to fall on other unknown grounds, and yield fruit.”

(Ramundo Panikkar, “Letter to a Young Monk,” *Living Prayer*)

We choose to invite, encourage, and challenge the church writ large to move toward living together in peace and to work to lead the whole world toward God’s *Shalom*.