

## Growing into Our Faith

Luke 18:15-17

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Sept. 14) 2025

Dedication of Isabel Luna Cline

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*Children will never have faith unless there is a community of faith for them to live in and be influenced by.*

- John Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

I remember a Sunday morning in church, when I was about six or seven years old, I looked up and saw tears running down my mother's cheeks while we sang the hymn, "It is Well with My Soul." It upset me and I tugged on her arm until she leaned down and whispered that everything was fine, and we'll talk after church. In the car after church, I asked her what was wrong. She smiled in a reassuring way and said, "Nothing is wrong. I just love that hymn and it makes me cry whenever we sing it. It reminds me that we can trust God no matter what and of so many people, most are dead and gone but they loved that hymn, too." I said, "Who?" She said, "Sometimes your great-grandmother, Callie, would sing this hymn when she was cooking. She was a terrible singer, but she loved that hymn." With that, the conversation shifted to other terrible singers in the family and in church, but the notion that singing hymns is about something larger than just myself, and something longer than just this moment, and in all that we meet God, is something that has never left me.

Albert Schweitzer was a world renown musician, a medical doctor, an ordained Lutheran minister, a highly respected New Testament scholar and

recipient of the 1952 Nobel Prize for Peace, but he is best remembered as a medical missionary in Central Africa. Schweitzer died in 1965. His father was a Lutheran pastor and Schweitzer grew up in church. He recalled that in childhood he stood every Sunday by his mother as she and the congregation sang hymns beyond his grasp. He did not understand what they were singing about but he remembered with gratitude those experiences. He remembered with gratitude not in spite of them being beyond him but because they had been beyond him. He said he had felt a grandeur in them, and he saw how the adults were moved by them. Schweitzer said from a very early age he believed that the mystery and presence of God must be something worth growing toward. He said it was something he never outgrew.

This faith in Christ is something we grow toward. Following Jesus is larger and longer than us. It is something that we grow into. Sometimes it is a sense of the mystery of God, with hymns and scripture telling and retelling the sacred story of this God we come to know in Christ. It is the story that continues from one generation to the next.

In Wendell Berry's upcoming novel, *Marce Catlett*, young Wheeler Catlett remembers the stories his father Marce had told him about farming and caring for the land, about taking care of each other, and learning that we are all connected, including the land and its creatures. Berry reflects on young Wheeler, "In those days nobody knew that he was a boy who belonged to a story. In those days he did not know it himself." But over time, as Wheeler grows and grows into the story, Berry writes, "Because of the story, there were some kinds of a man that Wheeler could not be, a certain kind that he had to become, and certain things that he had to do."

As we raise our children and young people, and as we all grow into the story of Jesus Christ, we learn that there are some kinds of people we cannot be, and that there are certain kinds we must become, and there are certain things we must do.

What we're seeking to do is not simply remember the story of Jesus but to inhabit it. And we want our children to not only know and remember it, but we want them to inhabit it. To practice living into it so that we become a certain kind of people – followers of Jesus Christ – a people of hope and healing, love and mercy, who practice non-violence and justice. A people with integrity, who seek to know the truth and can be trusted. And there are certain kinds of people we will not become – people who are mean, who lie, who are greedy, or hurtful, and violent.

And we do this slowly and surely over time. To quote Wendell Berry again, we are to do the slow, small work of “planting sequoias.”

What I'm talking about is what the church calls formation, not simply education. Education is usually conceived as giving information. We do that here in church (and every one of us need more education about our faith, our faith's history, and about the Bible). But more than education, we are committed to formation. The Apostle Paul said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...” (Rom. 12:2). Formation is training and training how we see, how we behave, and how we feel so we will be more like Jesus Christ. Formation is not simply about what we do. It is about becoming certain kinds of people.

We're all being formed by something, especially our children. Consumerism is constantly forming our children to be ravenous consumers who never have enough. Technology, cell phones, video games, and so on form our brains determining how we think, relate or not relate, and see each other and the world.

We're all formed by something – it can be life-giving or death-dealing, the Way of Jesus Christ or the way of domination and division and despair.

Second, this is a communal task. We do this together. It's what we do together as the body of Christ. All of us together, in formal ways like worship and Sunday School but often in informal ways of conversation, interaction, and modeling behavior will be the way Isabel and Valentina, and the rest of our children, will grow up into followers of Jesus.

The Christian life is caught more than it's taught. And children catch it from you and me. Theologian Walter Brueggemann said, "If you ask almost any adult about the impact of church school on his or her growth, he or she will not tell you about books or curriculum or Bible stories or anything like that. The central memory is of the teacher, learning is meeting." This is true of Sunday School, but it is also true of worship, and all the other aspects of being in church. It is about meeting – relationships, community. So, when you are called upon to help with the children, or we have an intergenerational event, or we're just sitting around at a potluck, remember this is not simply about you. This is about *us*. This is about us raising and being the community for our children. This is about meeting and in that meeting we meet God.

When I was a young pastor, I used to worry more about how our children hear the faith and whether they understand it. For example, if I was to preach on the cross and sacrifice, I worried how our children might be scared off or grossed out or not understand. I'd worry over singing old hymns that did not connect with the youth of today and so on. I was worrying over how to connect an old story with a new generation.

We are a church, like most in North America and Europe, committed to age-appropriate concepts and language for children. In our worship service we give them a time all their own, then send them off to a time of learning and worship tailored just for their comprehension and growth.

And yet. Might there be value in children hearing language in church that is over their heads? It already happens, of course. The hymns, anthems, and many of the Scriptures we read include words that make little sense to young children. Is it a bad thing? When children are subjected, as they used to be and, in many places, still are, to sermons with words, concepts, and applications that they find meaningless and therefore boring, is it a waste of their time? To tell the truth, I don't think that it is.

We are helping our children grow into our faith.

My old teacher Fred Craddock remembers a young woman telling him that when she was a freshman in college she was so discouraged. She was failing her classes, had not had a single date, didn't have as much money as many of the other students, and didn't know many people. "I was just so lonely and depressed and homesick and not succeeding. One Sunday afternoon," she said, "I went to the river near the campus and climbed up on the rail just looking into the dark water below and how inviting it was for me to simply drown my sorrows and drown myself. For some reason or another I thought of the line, 'Cast all your cares upon him for he cares for you.'" She said, "I stepped back, and here I am."

Dr. Craddock said, "Where did you learn that line?"

She said, "I don't know."

Fred said, "Do you go to church?"

“No, ... Well, when I visited my grandmother in the summers we went to Sunday School, church, and I attended vacation Bible school with her.”

Dr. Craddock said, “Ah...”

There is an etching by Rembrandt called “Christ Preaching,” in which Jesus, with lifted hands, is addressing a small crowd. Most of the adults are listening thoughtfully, but in the foreground is a boy facing away from Jesus, absorbed in playing with a toy. If you trace the direction of Jesus’ gaze, you see that as he speaks, his eyes are on the oblivious boy, and that he is smiling. He is preaching to the future, pouring words over the boy like seeds that will lie dormant for a time, but only for a time....

So let the children come to him, even when the words are beyond them, which, come to think of it, is often the case for the rest of us, too, all of us, his still-learning little ones.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.