

Sermon: “Rejecting Jesus: Why the Children Leave Church”

Sunday, July 10, 2011

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Christ Church, Shaker Heights

Proper 10 Year A: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Let me ask two related questions to those of you who have teenage or older children in your life. This includes any young person who has “graduated from church” - a rite commonly referred to as Confirmation – and older. (If you don't have any children in your life in this demographic, bear with me, because this sermon is for all of us.) The two questions are related because you have to consider the first one in order to answer the second, which is where the heart of the matter is found.

First, are you satisfied with the religious faith commitment of these children in your life? If your answer to that question is an unequivocal yes, then you don't need to answer the second part. But if your response is anything less, than consider this second question: To what degree do you blame yourself for the state of their current religious commitment?

By the way, this question is not an attempt to make parents feel guilty about how they raised their children. We don't do guilt in this church.

Also the question is directed well beyond just parents. Like I said the sermon is for all of us.

Remember each time we baptize a new Christian we ask the gathered faith community: “Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support this person in their life in Christ?” For those of you who have been around Christ Church a while you know that I accept nothing less than a resounding “yes” to that question! Raising children, forming them in the Christian faith and supporting them throughout their life is a communal responsibility.

If it seems like that second question is the one with the hook in it, it is. It is intended to prick your conscious.

If you're an adult who takes your responsibility for the Christian formation of children seriously, to some degree, you do blame yourself for the faith choices they make, especially when they are different from the one's you taught them. This is especially true when a child chooses to abandon all connections to the faith that he or she was raised in.

You can hardly help it. Values, character, ethics and morality start in the home and the church, ideally both working in tandem. If our kids' values, character, ethics or morals and the faith that nurtured them, turn out differently from what we wanted for them,

then who's to blame? We assume that we are: their parents, grandparents, guardians, teachers, mentors, clergy and roll-models.

There is no shortage of adults in the Church who bemoan those children who chose to leave the faith practices they were raised in for another way of belief or no way at all. I hear a lot from adults anxious over children who have become secular humanists, agnostic, atheist or just plain old Sunday morning coach potatoes.

So, what is this perplexing, disappointing and at times heart-rending choice about when our children abandon the faith of their youth? How do we come to terms with children who have chosen to leave or abandon that faith? Is there anything we can do to stem this exodus of our young people who represent the future, the very survival of the Church? It's a complex topic with no easy answer, yet today's Gospel reading invites us to think about these questions and provides insight as to how we can address this issue.

In Jesus' parable of the sower, a man scattered seed over all his property. The seed that fell on the hard path were snatched up by birds before they had a chance to germinate. The seed that landed on rocky soil sprang up rather quickly, but soon withered away. The seed that fell among thorns germinated but was quickly choked out by the thorns. Only the seed that fell on fertile, deep, thorn-free soil yielded grain in the end.

Let me offer a perspective on how the parable applies to our children. How well the seed of faith grows in our kids not only depends on how conscientiously we try to plant it in them, but also on just what seed it is that we are trying to plant. If the seed is a message that ends up being dissonant with how our children come to understand life and the world when they start thinking for themselves, our children will more often than not reject that seed. They will – in our eyes- become infertile soil, preventing that seed from taking root and in their lives.

Now mind you, the seed of the Good News of Jesus is always good. The problem is Christians have frequently taken that Good News seed and made it into bad news seed, distorting and manipulating it based on prejudice, bigotry, superiority, fear and lust for power. In so doing the seed sown by many Christians in their children makes the Jesus of the Good News unrecognizable and frequently abhorrent.

In his best selling book, "Love Wins" Rob Bell talks about the different types of Jesus Christians have responded to and believed in. When Christians say that Jesus is the only path to salvation, Bell wonders just which Jesus that may be?

He tells one story of a devoutly religious father who sexually abused his daughter while reciting The Lord's Prayer and singing hymns. Bell asks, "Is this the Jesus we are to respond to?" I would ask, Is this the seed that we are sowing in our kids? Does our faith

believe that men and fathers can do no wrong and have the “Biblical right” to do whatever they want to women, to their children? Does Jesus believe that?

In another story Bell tells of a man who was invited to come to church by a friend. The man inquired if it was a Christian Church? When told yes, he relayed the story of Christians in his native Eastern Europe who rounded up the Muslims in his town, herded them into a building, where they opened fire on them with machine guns, killing them all. The man told the person that he had no interest in going to a Christian Church. Bell asks, “Is this the Jesus we are to respond to?” I would ask, Is this the seed we are sowing in our children? Is Christianity the only faith that God shows favor too? Are people of other faiths inferior to us and therefore in need of being exterminated, expunged from the earth? Does Jesus believe that?

Bell then asks, “Do you know any individuals who grew up in a Christian Church and then walked away when they got older? Often pastors and parents and brothers and sisters are concerned about them and their spirituality-and often they should be. But sometimes those individuals rejection of church and the Christian faith they were presented with as the only possible interpretation of what it means to follow Jesus may in fact be a sign of spiritual health. They may be resisting behaviors, interpretations, and attitudes that should be rejected. Perhaps they simply came to a point where they refused to accept the very sorts of things that Jesus would refuse to accept. Some Jesuses should be rejected.” (Rob Bell “Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived. ”)

Many of you know I am a regular at the Starbucks across the street. Two weeks ago as I was picking up my coffee and the Sunday papers before church, the young woman barista who waited on me asked if I was the pastor at the church across the street? I said yes, I was. She knitted her brow and said, “ Yours is the church that is flying the rainbow flag?” “Yes, that’s my church,” I responded. Her face brightened, “that is so cool” she said, and then added, “and so rare.”

What kind of Jesus has been presented to this young woman? Does she view Christianity as being a religion of hypocritical bigots who preach love but practice hate? If she was raised in a church, what distorted seed of faith did adults sow in her, that when she was old enough to think for herself, she rejected it?

The number one reason children reject the faith of their youth is that they came to recognize that the seed that was being sown in them was bad news. They came to understand that some Jesuses should be rejected.

The good news is they have wisely rejected the bad seed. The bad news is that they are missing the opportunity to know the authentic Jesus of abundant, radical love and to have a better life because of it.

We can change that! We can change the soil and we can sow the good seed of Jesus' Good News. We are called to be sowers and tillers and harvesters. At Christ Church we are intentional about creating rich soil in people's lives and casting the good seed upon it and nurturing them.

We do that pretty well. Visit any one of our Catechesis of the Good Shepherd atriiums and you will witness the rich soil of our children being sown with the love of the good seed of Jesus' Gospel. The atriiums are our little hothouses. As the plants are nurtured and grow they continue to be fed and watered through our youth and adult formation programs, our pastoral care, our outreach and ultimately our preaching and liturgy. We have seen the rich harvest our good seed and soil produces, bearing fruit and yielding, thirty, sixty and even a hundredfold. Look at what has happened these past five years in this parish if you need proof.

It's time to take the seed of that harvest and sow it in God's children who are not aware of it and us. God is calling us to this task. It's time to sow the Good News in God's children who believe that a Jesus of love does not exist or at best is a rare phenomenon. It's time to nurture new growth in them so that their lives can yield an abundant harvest. It's time to sow the seeds of love that come from the one and only authentic Jesus who can never, ever be rejected by those who know him.

Amen.