

WHAT SHOULD A CHILD DO TO BE FAITHFUL?

Seventh and final in the series "Questions from the Floor"

[John 6: 1-14](#)

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Prayer: Help us today, O God, to stop teaching and preaching long enough to start learning from children and telling the stories of Jesus to the world. Amen.

This is the final sermon based upon your questions from the floor. It was asked by a ten year old child. You'd think, then, that it would be an easy question to answer, much easier than questions about predestination, or who goes to heaven, or things like that. But God's in charge of those departments. I struggled more with this question than any other question. Why? Because the stakes are so high and because I so want to get it right.

I've also struggled because I want to address it to the children...whether they are 6 or 10 or 16. You adults can listen in if you like, but this is for the kids.

It is tough to be a kid these days. I don't know if it is tougher than it has ever been; children in the bible were not even considered to be humans...they were kind of "adults in training." Which is why what Jesus did was so radical. Pushing the adults aside and letting the children come to him. Children were not to be taken seriously. You certainly couldn't learn anything from children. I don't know if it is tougher to be a kid than ever before, but I do know it is tougher to be a kid than it was when I was a child.

I don't remember all of the details, but I remember seeing a list of the top ten discipline problems children had in school 40 years ago...things like chewing gum, running in the hallway, being too loud. And now...now some of the issues that you children and young people are confronted with...I don't know how you do it, and you have my respect and admiration when you are able to rise above all of those temptations that you have, when other kids say you have to do this in order to be "cool." And you say "No." That's hard to do. Adults find it hard to do. That's one reason I want to get it right, because it's tough being a kid, and the stakes are very high.

I thought about making a list of ten things a child could do to be faithful, but that was just too much. The situations that arise these days are so diverse, and so I decided just to give you a starting point. And the starting point is here, in church, in the community of faith. Why is that so important? Because we need you. We need you. You have something that we adults used to have, but we've become too grown up and have forgotten what those things are. So much of the joy I have in ministry, so much of the growth I have had in ministry, has been because of you.

I don't know if there is a greater joy for a preacher than to walk into the sanctuary and hear three year old Audrey McKinnon shout "There's Pastor Steve. Here's a picture I drew for you, Pastor Steve. Can I have a hug, Pastor Steve?" That's what the Psalmist means, I

think, when he wrote “Make a joyful noise to the Lord.” Or to see dear, dear eight year old Celia Landreth dance and prance around when she sees me in the hallway. How could any commentary describe God’s unrestrained joy at creation better than that?

I can’t tell you how much I learned about creation from the three ten-year-old musketeers, Matthew McIntosh, Webb Emerson, and Matthew Haynes as they stand at the door and explain why they are selling rainforest fudge, and why its important to take care of the environment that God has given us. You could read Genesis 1 until you are blue in the face, but it took two Matthews and a Webb for me to see, really see what its all about for us Christians, and to take our environment seriously.

Or...talk about me learning from you... how 17 year old Andrew Strong did something earlier in the year that I don’t think many adults could do. He was to read the scripture one morning. He had come and had practiced it earlier in the week, and took it very seriously. But the morning he was to read it, he found out that his cousin, a very close cousin, had died in a car accident that very morning. We tried to give him an out, said he didn’t have to do it, but there he was, reading with such poise and care, from the book of Job, no less. Now, I can read a book with big words describing how the Holy Spirit makes us strong, but nothing could have taught me that like Andrew that morning. We need you, kids, one and all, to teach us, to show us something about God that we have missed.

It might surprise you that even Jesus needed kids. Most of you are familiar with the story we read a little while ago; some of you know the song about the feeding of the 5,000 that Steve Berger helped us with earlier. You know that story, don’t you? Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell it. Jesus was in town, and a crowd gathered to see him. We know something about that. Several weeks ago Reese Witherspoon was in town to film a movie. They were filming right around the block, and people would gather behind the police lines and try to catch a glimpse of Reese Witherspoon (whoever that is!) And in our story, Jesus was in town! Or rather, near the town, out in the country, up on a mountain. And everyone went to hear him.

We know how there were thousands there and they were getting hungry. It had been a long day. Lots of walking. They couldn’t just go down to the local McDonalds, because it might surprise some of you to know that they didn’t have McDonalds back then. All the disciples could round up were a few loaves and some fish. There’s no way that could feed the crowds. But you know what happened. Everyone was fed. That’s the way I learned it.

But there is one aspect that I really didn’t notice until I was already a preacher and had preached on this a number of times. Maybe its because I was always reading this story with adult eyes focusing on Jesus or the disciples, or even the crowd, or maybe because this little part is only in John, and not in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But did you notice who it was that provided the bread and the fish? One of the disciples? Nope. A fisherman or a baker? Nope. A child. It was a boy who had the bread and the fish. Even Jesus needed a child to show people who he was so that they could better understand the love of God.

We need you. You'd be amazed at the difference you make in our lives. We don't tell you that enough, but its true. You just never know stuff like that. I remember hearing a story about Jackie Robinson. Have most of you heard the name Jackie Robinson? He was the first black baseball player to play in the major leagues. It was a long time ago, (I can say that because it was before I was born!) but even before Martin Luther King came around there was Jackie Robinson. The major leagues only had white players, and, I know its hard to imagine today, but there were a lot of people who didn't want baseball to be integrated. Some of the opposing players said they weren't even going to get on the same field as Jackie, and even some of his teammates didn't want to play with him.

You can imagine the kinds of responses he got as he went around the league to various cities. He had a few supporters, but sometimes the crowds got so nasty and started yelling bad things at him that he wanted to give it up. One day, I think it was in Philadelphia, the fans were particularly hostile. They'd yell at him and call him names. Jackie got a base hit and he rounded first and tried to stretch it into a double, but he was called out. As he made his way back to the dugout, the people in the stands were booing, yelling, cursing, and even throwing things at him. He said that that was the lowest point of his first year. He actually considered going to the dugout and keeping on walking out the stadium to go back home.

But then, above the crowd hysteria, he heard one solitary voice. "Atta boy, Jackie! Way to hustle! You'll get 'em next time! Keep it up." He looked up, and it was a little white boy cheering him on. Years later he wrote in his autobiography that that little boy probably saved his career, because he knew that what he was doing was worthwhile.

Jesus needed children. Jackie Robinson needed children. And we need you. That's one reason why it's important for you to be here.

But there is another reason. Not only will you do some good for others when you are here, but if you come to church, go to Sunday school and learn those Bible stories that many of you know, and come to worship even if you sleep through the sermon, if you get involved in WELL activities or sing in the choir or come to QUEST or BASIC or get involved in the Small Samaritans or Micah's Missionaries or even come on Thursday nights to More than a Meal, you will eventually learn the most important thing in the world that there is to know about you, and it is that bit of information that will do more than anything else to help you grow in faith.

You will know who you are and whose you are. At those times when things get tough, you will be able to remember who you are and whose you are. You will be able to remember that you are a child of God and that you are never alone. That is the most important thing you will ever need to know in order to be faithful.

How does that work? It's hard to describe, but it begins right here at the baptismal font.

It has been a long time since most of you children and young people have been baptized, and its my guess that most of you don't remember your baptism. I certainly don't

remember mine. But each time we have a baptism, and we are going to have a lot of them this fall, you will be given a reminder of the water of baptism that was placed upon your forehead. You can't see it, but its there. And more than anything else, that water reminds you who you are, and whose you are. It reminds you that you are a child of God, and you are never alone.

I remember a girl in a former church that I served. Joannie at first looked like any other kid, but she couldn't communicate real well with the other kids because she was autistic. She couldn't look people in the eyes and would rock back and forth some when she'd be around people. She couldn't sing, but she wanted to be a part of the children's choir, and she'd stand up there and smile while others would sing.

The other kids were wonderful. Let's not kid ourselves...you children and young people know that sometimes kids can be real cruel to each other. But these weren't. They'd help her with the music books, they didn't make fun of her. They'd make sure she had her snacks when they were passed out, and would help her with her robe when it was time to put it on. It's as though those kids understood something about what their baptism meant.

But after a while, my thoughts shifted from those kids to Joannie. And one day I asked myself, "What is it that causes a child to risk what Joannie risked, and to come there every week and face the challenge of being with all those kids?" What is it that enables her to stand up there and smile when everybody else is singing? Joannie, after all, spent every day in a special school with other autistic children, and this was the one day every week that she had to be with "typical" kids in the mainstream. There was certainly potential for hurt and disappointment and self-doubt that that represented. It was scary for her.

But she had a little ritual that she did that helped me to understand how she could do this. Whenever we would have a baptism, she would make it a point to go up to the baptismal font following the service and put her hand in the water. She wouldn't just dip it in there, she would swirl it around. She loved the feel of that water. And I think that deep down, she understood far better than most of us adults what that water meant. She was able to come week after week and risk engaging in life more fully because I think that deep down inside herself, she knew who and whose she was. As a baptized child of God, she trusted that God would not let her down, even as she, in her own way, could not let God down.¹

What can a child do to be faithful? I don't have a ten point charge to give you. All I know is that it all starts right here, in church, by the baptismal font. At a place where you are needed...your energy, your enthusiasm, your questions, your friendship. A place where above all, you can remember who you are, and whose you are, no matter what faces you.

Some years ago, the leading theologian in the world, a man by the name of Karl Barth, who wrote all sorts of big books about God, was asked towards the end of his life what was the most important thing that he would like for people to remember about all his writings. This man, who was by then about 70 years old, said, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

That's the most important thing for you to know. That you are a child of God, that Jesus loves you, that we love you, and that you will never, never be alone.

Thank you for your presence here today. We love you.

Amen.

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¹ Joannie's name has been changed. This is remarkably similar to a story that was told by Jon Walton at the Worship and Music conference in Montreat this summer about another little girl in his church. There must be something to it!

John 6:1–14 NRS

1 After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. **2** A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. **3** Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. **4** Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. **5** When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” **6** He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. **7** Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” **8** One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, **9** “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” **10** Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. **11** Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. **12** When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” **13** So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. **14** When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

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