

them through the rough waters of life no matter what.

They are introduced to Jesus Christ, not just in the pages of children's books, but as lived out in the love and hospitality of volunteers, staff and counselors. By the end of the week, they will hear a clear and gentle invitation to follow Jesus and to allow him to be their Saviour and their Lord.

Camp is a unique venue where kids and teens can take hold of the faith and own it for themselves. It's where they can ask tough questions, where the whole week is bathed in prayer, where they will meet other young people who are following in the way of Jesus and integrating their faith in their everyday lives.

But camp isn't forever. The summer comes to an end, and we send the campers and the staff back home. But as we do, we hope we have equipped them to press on in faith. We encourage them to connect to a community of faith, to continue to make prayer and Bible reading a part of their lives and to journey each day growing in knowledge and love of Jesus.

I was reading an interesting study from 2018 put out by the evangelical group InterVarsity about faith of young people in Canada. It found some interesting things about the impact of camp ministries.

First, the study found that young people who go to church camps are more likely to keep their faith. When someone has participated at a camp, they tend to also join their local youth group or regularly read their Bible.

Campers are given time to process and think through the whole 'Christianity thing' without their parents, which is crucial to them taking hold of their faith for themselves.

Second, the study found that people who are involved with camp are more than twice as likely to find a home church mentor. Mentorship is an essential step for someone to keep their faith.

Only 29% of kids who grew up in the church but did not go to camps found mentors in their home church. This number suddenly jumped to nearly 70% when camps were added into the mix.

And finally, the study found that young adults who went to a camp are twice as likely to get involved with another church after moving out of their parents' home.

This proves that camps help pass down the faith and reveals its importance to the Church's overall function. In general, 23.5% of young adults get plugged into a church after moving out; however, 55% of young adults who had attended camp will continue to be involved with a Church.

Helping our children move from one stage of faith to another is going to be the church's biggest challenge moving forward. How do we make that transition? How can we become a tool that God consistently uses to move kids in Sunday school to being leaders in faith as adults?

That's a tall order, but Paul gives us some clarity. We don't need to be told to press on – come one, you can do it! Try a little harder everyone!

No, we need to be partnered with Jesus in a relationship that guides, upholds and sustains all the days of our lives. We learn from the pro who can hit the shots we can't. That's what our faith is ultimately about. And church and camp are partners in this work. Camp is a tool Jesus can use to bring us closer to him.

Paul says we're heaven bound. We're not there yet. We've all got a ways to go. How do you get there? I have no idea! But together we will press on following our guide who knows the way. We strain toward it with the help of the One who is the way, the truth, the life.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

“Raising Up a Next Generation”

March 3rd, 2024 — Selby United Church – Scripture: Philippians 3:10-14

By Rev. Mike Putnam

There's something delightful about listening to children talk. And for those of us who spend a week or two at camp each summer, you hear a lot of talk. “Oh, yeah, well my Dad can do this” or “My mom can do that.” “How long do you think the pool is – “I could jump that.”

It's endearing. But there's a point when it stops being endearing. There's a point where you want to say “Okay, time to act more your age. It's time to start to grow up.” Now some people never do, but most people get to a point where boasting just seems childish.

And this is one of the markers of maturity in life, among others like taking responsibility for ourselves, getting a job, getting married, buying a home, etc. And along the way our sense of reality becomes more well-formed.

But if that's how you identify a mature person, how do you identify a mature follower of Jesus? What characteristics and behaviours can you look for to be able to say this person is a well-formed mature person of faith?

I'm curious about this subject, because I think I get adult spiritual growth – as we read books, do Bible studies and we deepen in our prayer life we grow.

And I think I get children's spiritual growth – we feed kids with lots of Biblical stuff. We teach them the stories of Jesus and we buttress those stories with the stories of Adam and Eve, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jonah and David. And then we teach kids to pray sweet little prayers and we give them jobs to do at church and hopefully they become believers – somehow...maybe...

But how do you go from a child of faith to an adult of faith? There's got to be something that happens. But I'd guess that in most churches today things get pretty fuzzy when we think about how to move someone from the spirituality of a child to the spirituality of an adult. And as a result, this is the time in most people's lives when kids disappear and never return – or at least take

a kind of long-term hiatus from faith.

I grew up in a bustling United Church. I remember every Sunday morning when we were dismissed from the big service with our parents, and we thunder down the hall to the Sunday School wing with 50 or 60 other kids. But today, when I have had the opportunity to return to that church none of those people I grew up going to Sunday School with still go. I'd say I am one of the rare few who actually pressed on beyond that Sunday school experience into an adult faith.

And this is a crisis in the church. We have not given very much thought or effort to figuring out what it is that can get young followers of Jesus to stick with their faith into the beauty and depth of an adult faith that can ballast them for the rest of their lives.

But, why? Why is that transition so perilous? What's missing to make the link between Sunday school and adult faith?

Well, of course there are societal and cultural forces at work. I went to Sunday school in a time when it was still pretty culturally normal to belong to a church. That has changed rapidly. But I'm not talking about a social shift this morning, that's a subject for another day. Today I'm talking about that personal level of faith commitment. How does that work and how do we make that shift a priority in our churches?

And so, this morning we have heard the Apostle Paul telling the church in Philippi about his own faith journey. How did it happen? What's happening now? What will happen next?

Paul begins his explanation saying, “I want to know Christ – yes to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”

“I want to know Christ.” This, I think, is the first key to making the transition in faith. I once had a person ask me why we talk so much about Jesus at camp. Why not just talk about God? I mean, talking about Jesus could be interpreted as being kind of exclusive. Not everyone believes in Jesus – why not just talk

about God instead.

But you see, Jesus is the key. Because we can talk about God all day long – the God who is out there somewhere. Is God good? Is God kind? Does God care? Who knows? But talk about Jesus and now we’re really saying something. Jesus says, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). And that’s good news.

Because in Jesus we find that God turns out to be endlessly compassionate, merciful, patient, loving and kind. Words other religions would never apply to God.

We find that God isn’t actually out there somewhere doing who knows what, but we find a God who is like a shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep to go after the 1 (me and you). God is like a woman who loses a coin and turns her whole house upside down to find it and then throws a great party when I’m found (I mean the coin is found). And God is like a father whose son treats him like he is dead and takes his inheritance early and goes and wastes it all on loose living, and when he returns desperate and ruined, is welcomed home restoring him to the family.

And the only reason I know that this is what God is like is because Jesus told me so. But most of all, because of Jesus I know that our perfect and holy God doesn’t hold my mistakes and failures against me because Jesus (my elder brother) stepped into the breach for me and having lived the kind of life I should have lived suffered the kind of punishment I should have endured. Taking the full brunt of the cosmic devastation caused by my sin and my failure to love and trust God perfectly.

Jesus is the key. And a mature faith can never be possible until we say – yeah, I’ve heard all these stories about Jesus in Sunday school and “I want to know Christ.” I want to know this person not from books or videos or Sunday school teachers, but this person who lives and abides with me by Holy Spirit.

Imagine you show up to your local golf course to play a game of golf with a friend. Just as you are about to head out to the first tee the guy at the shop says, “Oh Mr. So and So, today the course pro will be joining you.

I don’t know about you, but I would

hate this. Oh my gosh, no, that’s not a good idea. I don’t want him to see my slice or have to endure with me while I wander through the long grass looking for my ball. No, no, He can just play through. He can play with someone else.

But what if the guy at the shop said something different. Mr. So and So, the course pro has been watching you play. He has studied your game from a distance. He sees what you are struggling with. He knows all about your difficulties. He wants nothing more than to be your coach. He wants to spend some time with you, he’s going to carry your bag, he’s going to give you support and encouragement so you can improve. Oh, and by the way, he’s paying. That’s what faith in Jesus is like.

I want to know Christ Jesus! He already knows all about you. He already knows how you habitually slice and hack your way thought life. He knows what you need and how you need it. We just need him along for the journey.

Next Paul says, “Not that I have already obtained this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and Sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it.”

Now, that’s really something coming from someone who wrote 2/3 of the New Testament! Paul says he has not yet achieved maturity in faith. He still has a ways to go. He still needs the pro along to make corrections and to guide him in his life.

And if this is what the apostle Paul is saying, then who are we to ever say I’m done, I’ve got it all figured out, I’m good. No, we should always be humble about our progress in faith. Because when we’re not we sound like the kid claiming he can jump the whole length of the pool. It’s a sign of immaturity. It shows how young we are. There’s not one in the room today – including me – who has made it.

That’s why every week I gather with a group of pastors, and we read and study the Bible. We all have degrees theology. But every Wednesday at noon we sit down together and study God’s word – not as experts but as children trying to walk in the demanding way of Jesus.

The Bible contains such great

mysteries that no scholar could ever fully plumb the depths of in a lifetime. There’s always more to learn, more insights to be gleaned, and more application to be made.

And finally, Paul says, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” And in this simple statement we find the crux of what it means to mature in faith. In this one line Paul has given us a treasure trove of insight!

How does faith happen? We’re called to it. Faith in any form never happens unless we’re called.

“Lazarus come out” is Jesus’ call to his dead friend. How did Lazarus come back to life? Did he set some goals for himself, work toward his goals, achieve his goals? No, Jesus called him out of death and into life. And the same is true for us.

I work on the assumption that if you are here this morning it’s because you are called. I could be wrong, but I’m willing to err on the side of caution. And when a family shows up with children in tow, I’m assuming that by God’s mysterious providence, he has arranged it.

Paul says in Romans 8:30 – “And those he predestined he also called; those he called he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” And that means God has your faith journey already worked out – it’s predestined. And it begins with a calling. That’s an amazing sentence. It implies both a certain future and a choice to be made on your part. God is amazing!

But being called is only the beginning. Next, we must take hold of our calling. Paul says, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” How do you know you’re a maturing Christian? Because you’ve taken hold of your calling.

We know God is working because you are changing – however slowly and in whatever small degree. It will happen when it happens and how God wants it to happen. But we’ve got to take hold of it. We must take ownership over the fact that God is doing something in you.

And this, I think, is the challenge many young people face in their faith. They’ve been fed with the content of faith – they have been introduced to God through Jesus Christ, but now

what? How do they take hold of it? What does that look like? And so, too many young people simply move on. They know things but they haven’t taken hold of them. There’s no mechanism for this to happen in many young people’s spiritual journey.

And so finally, Paul tells us that spiritual maturity comes as we “press on.” He says, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”

So, one of the marks of maturity is putting our faith into practice. We can sit in Sunday school rooms and learn the stories of faith, but eventually those stories need to start to be applied in our lives. Eventually we need to start to live and act differently because of the claim God has on each of us.

So that’s it. That’s how spiritual maturity happens. It begins when we want to know Christ and who he is for me and what he has done for me. Spiritual maturity isn’t about head knowledge it’s about a relationship. And that relationship begins with a calling.

Spirituality maturity is knowing we will never attain it on our own. We’re always pressing on towards it and Jesus is the captain of the journey.

And Spiritual maturity comes from the journey. We’re always on the way somewhere with Jesus. He’s never finished with us. He always has more. He’s always taking us somewhere or to someone new.

This is a church that takes children’s ministry pretty seriously. As we’ve said, our mission here is to “Raise up a next generation of followers of Jesus.” We believe that we’re all better off when we’re actively engaged in the work of raising up generations to be followers.

But then we get them to a certain point and now what? How do we move children in Sunday school to mature followers of Jesus who live out their faith every day? How do we take ordinary kids who are indoctrinated by a culture of narcissism and consumerism and help them to follow the radically different way of Jesus?

Well, one of the best tools I know of is camp. At Golden Lake Camp, surrounded by friends and occupied with fun and wacky games the kids are introduced to a friend who will see