

August 29, 2010 Beyond Christian Living 101

This would have been a much different sermon but our puppy dog died this week. Tuesday we awoke to happy puppy tail wagging and licking and a few short hours later she was hit by a car, never to recover. She was seven months old, we adopted her in May. She was the world's perfect puppy. Rusty was ours and we loved her dearly. We were hers and she loved us just as well.

We have been grieving openly and without apology. It is a reminder that life is very fragile and that the pain of loss is directly proportional to the amount of love invested. We tend to love pretty passionately in our home and we dearly loved Rusty. Now she's gone and we are suffering. "Just" a dog does not compute for us right now. Pain is pain.

Faith crises are never predictable. We never know just when or where they might hit us. The only thing predictable about them is that they will come. And when they come, 6th grade faith is not enough to get us through.

My daughter Anya is 8 years old. She will begin third grade this week. She still believes in magic. She still believes that prayer can work like magic. Anya has been hit so very hard by the loss of her little puppy it has broken my heart again and again to watch it unfold. But she believes in magic. Anya asked me to pray on Tuesday night, just hours after the death of our dog. She asked me to pray that God would bring Rusty's spirit back to earth and put it back into her broken little body so that she could be healed and come back to us. I tried to explain to my lovely little daughter that prayer doesn't work like that, that God can't or won't do that, that God has to follow God's own rules of Physics and Biology. But Anya persisted, and not only do I love Anya and will do just about anything to try to help her feel better, but I also wish that God would do just that, to bring back our precious little puppy dog. So I prayed it. I put my heart into that prayer. But I also prayed for those things that I do believe God responds to. I prayed for peace, I prayed for wisdom, and I prayed for strength so that our little family might recover – knowing that time is the great healer and that we surely would. I do believe that God holds us in loving arms through these times.

But it didn't take an 8 year olds pleading to have me praying in ways that go beyond reason, not that prayer is ever within reason. I was the one who rushed our little Rusty to the vet clinic and arrived just minutes too late for it to do any good. But still the vet tried and I prayed over that little puppy body. I begged God to intervene. I promised that I would never doubt again if only God would breathe life back into that little frame. I'm a trained theologian, and I am in a vet's office begging and bartering with God for the life of a

small furry animal. But this is real. Pain is real. The human response to pain and suffering has been to search for answers and build mysteries around ourselves in order to make sense of the chaos. And it gets complex. People have lost faith when they realized that their childhood belief in magic prayer doesn't work. 6th grade faith is not enough to get us through.

I have spent the last several days asking the same question over and over and over. Why, God, why? Why is there so much pain and why must my little family feel it now? Why?

From time to time this week I have felt compelled to put some perspective in place around this pain. First of all, this was just, *just?*, a puppy. My daughters are safe. I have not lost a child. Can I thank God for that? Secondly, this is pain in the midst of the good life. Here we are, living in Burlington Vermont. Possibly the best place to live in the world – certainly one of the best. Our little family is also pretty stable economically. We are safe, we are well fed, we have more than enough, we are happy, we love one another, and we have so much hope for the future that we take it completely for granted. This is no sub-Saharan Africa where famine, war, AIDS, malaria, and corruption snatch loved ones by death or worse every day. This is pain in the midst of the good life and this is just, *just?*, a puppy.

Even so, our hearts still break and our faith still shutters. Our puppy is gone forever and even the faint hope of a heavenly reunion is small consolation. 6th grade faith is not enough to get us through.

What is 6th grade faith? 6th grade faith, as I define it, is the culmination of our years of concrete thinking just before our brains develop the capacity for abstract thought somewhere around 6th grade. As children we believe almost everything that we are told. From fairies and elves to Noah and Adam and Eve. And then we begin adolescence. I don't know if you are familiar with the old Disney movie *Bedknobs and Broomsticks* but we have been watching it recently. The movie is about three children during World War II who, like the children in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* are shipped out of London to the countryside for safety. These children end up living in the home of a witch, a lovely good witch who does all sorts of benign spell casting. The oldest of these children is Charlie and he is hitting that age. The age of not believing sings the good witch to Charlie:

When you rush around in hopeless circles
Searching ev'rywhere for something true
You're at the age of not believing
When all the "make believe" is through

When you set aside your childhood heroes
And your dreams are lost up on a shelf
You're at the age of not believing
And worst of all you doubt yourself

You're a castaway where no one hears you
On a barren isle in a lonely sea
Where did all the happy endings go?
Where can all the good times be?

You must face the age of not believing
Doubting ev'rything you ever knew
Until at last you start believing
There's something wonderful...
Truly wonderful in you

Now, this is a little Disney ditty, but in it is a great truth. We must face the age of not believing. For most of us it comes in adolescence. In the church, as small children we have been trained in the stories of the bible. Then sometime around middle school, we begin to question everything we have ever known. Our brains have grown to the capacity where we can hold two opposing opinions at the same time and try them against one another. Our questions grow bigger and deeper. And at the same time our awareness of the pain in the world around us comes more and more into focus. The foundations of our childhood faiths are rattled and the structure collapses leaving us with some building materials but little else.

There are some who don't reject their childhood faith. Some good folk hang on to it shoring up their foundations with fear and anger because unknowing is far too difficult to deal with in an already painful world. But the problem there is that more often than not, those poor souls then inflict their reinforced foundations of fear and anger on the world around them. Wars have been fought over 6th grade faith and 6th grade faith has created atheists and fundamentalists alike. If you have ever tried to challenge the ideas of someone with a 6th grade faith, then you have experienced the backlash. It sometimes comes in the form of disinterest or even pity, but often it is tinged with anger, laced with fear. There is a large contingent of churches, movements, and political platforms that make their living on the fear and anger reinforced faith foundations of their constituents.

Children of the progressive church have a different obstacle to contend with. Those of us in the mainstream churches are not fired up in a frenzy of fear and have forgotten just how important it is to pass on the knowledge and the questions that we have learned to our youth. We have neglected youth ministry, we have belittled it, we have set it aside as a low priority. Some of the reason for this may be that we simply don't know how to address it. How do we help our children grow up through the tumult of the teenage years? How do we let them explore but also call them back? How do we give them the tools that they need in order to construct an adult's faith, one that can flex in the winds of crisis, one that can doubt it's own certainty in the midst of new information and in so doing learn and grow, one that can fuel a love of life and a radical hope that will allow them to create a more peaceful world? Not knowing how to go about it, we have set it aside.

But some of the reasons for this low youth ministry priority are more damning. We have become windbags, as we read in the passage from Jeremiah. It is much more ego stroking to preach a long and well exegeted sermon to a crowd of impressed adults than it is to struggle to make spiritual truths relevant to a rowdy crowd of teenagers who are also, like that crowd of adults, constantly putting on a show for one another. The show with teens is just much less in their leaders favor as they are not interested in the emperor's new clothes, they see right through us. It is more pleasing to put on a show of theological knowledge than to admit our own agnosticism while struggling to still preach the good news. It is easier to get our theological training and then enter into a well established, well paying clergy role ministering to those who pay our salaries rather than attending to those whose futures can most be affected by our journey together. We let volunteers, green seminarians, and low paid lay folk do what we see as a job not worthy of our time. If I sound jaded it is because I have been and heard the struggles of those volunteers, those green seminarians, and those lay folk who are consistently paid less than the church janitor. They struggle to love and to teach these young people who are themselves so undervalued by the church. Why have we forgotten that our future rests on the hope of our children? It may sound jaded, but even the tobacco companies know that if you want a future you market to the youth.

And it isn't just the future of the institutional church that is in jeopardy for the loss of new, well reasoned and hopeful adult Christians. No, the world stands to lose so much for our failures. Last week, at Ascension Lutheran Church down the road, I preached about why we need to keep the church alive. I won't rehash that here, but suffice it to say, it is important to do so; from intentional intergenerational community to calls for social action, we need the church. But most importantly, let us not forget that each young life touched can

then have more than a 6th grade faith to give them some small shelter through the crises of life. Because crisis will come and it will come, as my family learned again this week, very unexpectedly.

So let me tell you how we're trying to assure that the church's doors remain open for those who need healing and comfort for years to come. The idea of Ripple began just over a year ago. Well, that's the shorter story as the longer one includes many years that I have had an inkling in my heart that I was being called to something like this. But in May 2009 I had the opportunity to express to Ascension's Council why I believe that youth ministry is essential. I talked to them about the 80% principle which is that 80% of adult Christians, regardless of stripe, made their decision to be a Christian or a member of a church before the time they were 18 years old. I mentioned that the average tenure of a youth group leader is 18 months and that this had much to do with the lack of support for the ministry in general in the church. You can't build a youth ministry that will last in only 18 months. We talked about the many aspects of youth ministry, from games and topics to worship and counseling. They were already searching for a part time youth ministry director for their church and shortly after that meeting they extended me an invitation to consider taking the position. At that time I was indeed searching for a new job but what I needed was a full time position with benefits not the part time position that was being offered. This is a common problem in youth ministry. Very few churches have the financial capacity these days to hire a youth pastor even very part time. Actually, that Ascension, a fairly small congregation, was even putting such a large amount of funding toward their youth ministry program was inspiring.

So we talked and the idea emerged to create a youth ministry program that would bring together various congregations and their youth in order to support a fulltime position and ministry. Shared resources, shared outcome. So we began working towards this idea of a regional ecumenical youth ministry cooperative. It is a new idea and Ripple was born.

Over the summer and then early fall of last year we developed ideas, we talked with dozens of congregations, we recruited leaders of both youth and adults, we hit upon our core purpose and theology of creating peace in the world, and we constructed a program that would launch quite successfully in January. Ripple's tag line is: We never quite know how one small action, inspired by love to bring about peace, might ripple out and change the world. As a youth group we meet on 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month and our leadership team meets on 2nd and 4th Tuesdays in order to plan those meetings. At the same time that youth group meets, we have a parent group that discusses the same topics as the youth with the hope that our parents will get to connect to one another and support one another through these crucial years as well.

Each youth group meeting has a theme generated by some of the youth, our peer ministers, and they also develop the small group questions used for each week. Our topics are broad. The passage from Hebrews that we read today covers a whole lot of ground and we try to go even further. Ripple has five layers of peace that we cycle through and call to the attention of our youth. No one layer is complete without the others and any layer missing is a detriment to the ones around them. They are: creating peace within ourselves, creating peace within our families, creating peace in our other relationships (like friends and significant others); creating peace in our communities, and creating peace in our world. Specific topics from season I include Finding Life Balance, Managing Parents, How NOT to Lose Yourself in a Relationship, Homelessness with guest Mark Redmond of Spectrum Youth and Family Services, and World Hunger.

At each meeting the youth hear a talk from me or a guest speaker or another youth from the group, then they have small group discussions in groups gathered by grade so that our younger youth and older youth can interact on their own terms as we do cover the full grade range from 6th – 12th. We also have plenty of community building time as the thing that will bring them back is the relationships that are formed there. And it will be those relationships that they can rely on as they come closer together and build trust.

One of our last youth group meetings last season was themed: Transitions. We had two guest speakers that day, one was a college freshman who had just completed her first year and she talked about the transition from home to college. Our second guest speaker was Pastor Rick Neu who is one of the chaplains at the Vermont Children's Hospital. Both spoke are transitions that our youth will someday experience – leaving home and illness and death. We talked about what we do to cope through these times of hardship and change. Pastor Neu made an interesting point that most parents do not talk with their kids about end of life issues. We don't talk about death because we don't want to believe it happens. Death is almost taboo in our culture and it is definitely illegal. Where else do people come together to contemplate and learn how to find meaning in death? So we talk about it at youth group. It isn't an easy topic, but it is important. It takes more than a 6th grade faith to deal with it because few youth I come across find a simple answer in the idea of death. It is easier to say to a child a simple heavenly answer but a youth will question it from bottom to top. And that is good. That shows signs of a thinking faith, one that is real and dynamic and ready to grow and change. They need the space to question without consequence and to think without limits. So do we.

Youth group is about changing the world. Each young person who is inspired and challenged has the capacity to create ripple effects all over the world for years and years to come. You never know how one small action, inspired by love to bring about peace, might ripple out and change the world.

I hope that someday Ripple itself will expand. We are expanding in this community, but I would love to see similar co-ops spring up in other communities as well. What would it mean for the church and for the world to have a new group of young people of faith coming forward?

Sure, technically you can get through the death of a puppy on a 6th grade faith. You can, in deed, get through just about anything with a faith that is immature. But it is a getting through, a getting by, a hanging on, a life left unexamined. Perhaps it is the passionate love of life and of one another that calls us to find deep and lasting meanings behind both the pain and the joy that we experience. I could get by on a simple 6th grade faith but then I wouldn't be living as fully, as completely, as tangibly alive as I live in this world today. If there was something to be learned from the short but vibrant life of our lost pup Rusty it is this: love everyone you ever meet with enthusiasm as if they were the most important person in that moment and let joy be expressed through your whole self from your nose to the tip of your tail. Some creatures and people live long lives but never really live. But Christ called us to live, really live, fully alive, open to the joy of life, finding deep compassion in the lives of those we meet, and creating a world where everyone can live so fully. For me, this is salvation. I'm with Rusty. Don't just live. LIVE! This is the good news! God wants us to LIVE and that includes helping other to do the same by creating a more peaceful world. This is what the church needs to share with the world and this is what I hope Ripple can teach to all of the young lives that walk into our ministry.

Christian Living 101 can be summed up with this: Love God with everything you are, from the tip of your nose to the tip of your tail, and love your neighbor as you love yourself so that they can do the same. These are the simple instructions, but without an adult faith the crises of life will overrule them. We need to teach our young people both the instructions and give them the tools to construct a faith that will last. These are the crucial years. Life is short. Make it ripple! Amen.