

LEARNING TO SPEAK CHRISTIAN

Scriptures: Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Exodus 12:21-27

This morning instead of our second scripture lesson I want to show a short film clip about how children understand concepts of faith. One of the questions of faith submitted this summer asked, “How do you raise a Christian family?” In other words, how do we share our faith with our children? The key to this is to understand how children think—how children form concepts like prayer, Christian, and God. This film is the finest demonstration of that I have ever seen. It’s an old film, made in 1971. The interviewer and the children are wearing 60’s style haircuts and clothes, but the children are a lot like children today. You will meet them in this order:

- First, the two youngest children: Rebecca and Mark, ages 4 and 5
- Next, two middle grade school boys: David and Victor, both 8 years old.
- Last, the oldest children: Clifford, age 11, and Stephanie, age 10

All of the children are from a Presbyterian church, except Victor, one of the 8 year-olds, who happens to be Jewish. This segment of the film begins with the interviewer asking 4 year-old Rebecca, “What is prayer?” Notice how the answers change as the children get older.

(Watch the last 9 minutes of movie “What Do You Think?”)

This sermon has one simple point: becoming a Christian is a lot like learning to talk. When you learn to talk, you learn to say words before you fully understand what they mean, and the same is true for learning faith. Children learn the words and gestures of faith before they fully understand what they mean. In fact learning the words and gestures of faith help children eventually understand what faith means.

Notice how this is illustrated in the case of prayer. When asked what prayer is, little Rebecca says, “You put your hands together and you pray.” She cannot explain prayer, but she knows how you are supposed to act when you pray. Mark, who is one year older, has gone a step further. When asked what prayer is, he clasps his hands and says, “God is great and God is good and we thank him for our food. Amen.” Mark cannot explain prayer, but he can say one.

That is how you teach prayer to a young child. You don’t try to explain prayer; you teach them how to say one. Children learn to talk by hearing words and repeating them. Children learn about faith the same way. They learn about faith by hearing the words of faith and observing the practices of faith before they fully understand what they mean.

If you remember, later in the movie when Victor, the 8 year-old Jewish boy, is asked to describe God, the first thing he says is that there is only one God. Why did he say that? Because he had heard this over and over at home and at the temple in the verse we read this morning from Deuteronomy 6. After telling the Israelites that the Lord our God is one Lord, Moses says to the people of Israel, “Recite (these words) to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign upon your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your

house and on your gates.” Because Victor had these words plastered on his doorposts, they were also plastered in his mind.

As children practice using the language of faith they become more sophisticated in their understanding of it. It was interesting to notice how Clifford, the 11 year-old boy, had a much more sophisticated understanding of prayer. Like Mark he talked about thanking God for food, but he also mentioned thanking God for a job that allowed us to buy food and clothes. Clifford is already beginning to understand the relationship between praying for something and participating in God’s work to provide it. Clifford is learning that relationship by the very way his family prays at the dinner table.

What about the concept of being a Christian? When asked what a Christian is, little Rebecca replies, “I know a boy named Christian.” For children the abstract concept of a Christian is understood only by knowing people who are Christians. If you want your children to understand what it means to be a Christian they have to meet some. They have to associate with people who have Christian as their common identity.

Again it is like learning to talk. Children learn what an apple is by seeing apples, and they learn what a Christian is by seeing Christians.

What about the concept of God? How do children learn about God? It happens as they see the word God applied to different situations in their lives. When little Rebecca is asked to describe God, she says, “Jesus is God.” Where did Rebecca learn that? I suspect she learned that from observing how the name of Jesus was used in worship. She probably noticed that we always pray to God in the name of Jesus, so she learned to put the two together. She also noticed that we sing songs to God in church but that we also sing songs to Jesus and the two are almost interchangeable. Just by participating in worship she is learning the grammar of faith.

The best line in the whole movie is when the interviewer says to Rebecca: “What’s the difference between God and Jesus?” She replies, “God doesn’t have birthdays and Jesus does.” Wow. Four-year old Rebecca is beginning to understand the Trinity. She may not know the word “incarnation,” but she is beginning to understand the concept because she celebrates it every year at Christmas. Jesus is God with a birthday.

Children learn many concepts about God by the way their family worships. In Exodus 12 Moses commands the people of Israel to celebrate the Passover year after year, so that in future years when children ask, “Why are we doing this?” they can explain what it means.

Now let me add here a word of caution and hope. Raising a Christian family is always an unfinished process. You can see that in Stephanie, the oldest girl in the movie. She is the one who tells the interviewer, “I don’t see how you can believe in someone you can’t see.”

You know, when your children are young you teach them how to talk, but somewhere around the age of 13 they forget how. These wonderful children, who had expansive vocabularies at the age of 10, are suddenly reduced to monosyllabic grunts and nods.

Don't panic. The vocabulary is still there. If you noticed, even though Stephanie was not sure she believed in God, she could still describe quite eloquently what God is supposed to be like: forgiving and loving even to those who don't deserve it. I think the day will come when Stephanie will want to get reacquainted with that God—a God who accepts people by grace and not because they are always perfect.

But here is the real point of this sermon: even adults who think they already know how to talk need practice in using the language of faith. You have probably all seen bloopers in bulletins or newsletters. One that appeared on a church sign said, "Don't let worry kill you off—let the church help." Another said, "The Low Self-esteem group will meet Thursday at 7 p.m. Please use the back door." Both of those notices were grammatically correct, but I don't think they communicated what the writer intended to say.

Sometimes even adults need help with grammar, and the same is true for the grammar of faith. God does not become real to you or your children in the way you think about God but in the way you practice God's presence in your life. Following Christ involves learning the language of faith, learning how to apply concepts like prayer, Christian, and God to daily life. If you hang around long enough with others who are practicing that language, eventually you and your children will get the hang of it.

- Ken Onstot