

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

*Growing Up*  
*Psalm 124; Mark 9.38-41*  
Russ Dean, October 25, 2009



Growing up is not easy. And navigating life's unruly passages is hardly an aside – it is the essence of life itself, for of whom can be said he or she has attained or arrived? There is always more growing to do. We move from the selfish naiveté of infancy to the unsteady exploration of toddlerhood. The unreserved innocence of childhood soon gives way to the awkward development of pre-adolescence and then the hormonal blur which is politely called adolescence. After the brash exuberance of young adulthood we find ourselves so surprisingly in the steadying self-assurance of mid-life, with its dangerous propensity to reverse into crisis. Before we know it, we are living the satisfying stability of maturity, but with an uneasy eye to approaching western horizon of aging. And the secure confidence of the senior years gives way, always too soon, to the second childhood of life's final days. There is no end to the changing scenery of this life's journey – and every stage only presents more opportunity for us to grow up, a little more each time.<sup>1</sup> But the offer of growth is not its guarantee.

We teach children, as one author has insightfully claimed, everything they need to know in life, in kindergarten.<sup>2</sup> But many haven't learned to play fair, even when they've arrived at the teenage years. And too many do not share, even when mature adulthood brings financial security and virtually unlimited resources. And as our nation's sad wars make evident, even many of our supposed best and brightest seem determined never to outgrow the childish instinct to hit back. Folks, this need not be heard as some kind of preacherly piety, the idealism of a kind of ivory

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare outlines the stages of life in his poem, "The Seven Ages of Man," which begins: "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players, / They have their exits and entrances, / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages..."

<sup>2</sup> *All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* is by Robert Fulghum.

tower aloofness from the realities of life. We need to grow up. If we do not believe it, we should not teach it to our children. If we believe that our conflicts can be solved in more mature ways... we need to prove it. In all our doings. Grow up. At home. Grow up. At the office. Grow up. When one neighbor snipes another with petty insults. Grow up. When the government refuses to play fair and share. Grow up. When a nation insists on solving its problems with age-old childishness. Grow up. When the Church cannot see beyond its own walls. We need to grow up.

The question is not, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" It's much more basic than that. The issue for us all, and the world, is simply: "Are we going to grow up?" In an article entitled "A Startling Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church," Tom Thresher has this to say:

Now, more than ever, the West needs a mature Christianity. One that contributes moral and spiritual guidance to a world facing a multitude of crises: from terrorism to financial collapse, from poverty to global warming; from oil depletion to incessant war. Why? Because we are by nature spiritual and no solution can suffice without including the spiritual. However, a spirituality, a religion enmeshed in literalisms and dogma cannot serve this role. The church can only speak to these crises by offering increasingly expansive perspectives on our lives and the issues of the day. And the religious traditions are best suited to inspire these expanding perspectives because they grew up with humanity and only these traditions have the legitimacy to point beyond themselves.<sup>3</sup>

What will the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century look like when we hit a mid-century stride? I do not know, but unless we learn to share, and to play fair, and to turn from our violent means, and unless we learn to look beyond the little world of "mine," the Church is doomed to make itself as irrelevant to an increasingly developed world as a toddler would be in a session of the U.S. Congress.

John, who was called the beloved disciple, had not grown up. Despite his days with Jesus, all the sermons, all the lessons, all the intimate conversations, John's understanding of the world and its spirituality was myopic. He could not see beyond the nose on his face. Like the little child who selfishly cries, "Mine!," John's faith was too parochial to be beneficial. Some

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<sup>3</sup> From the website of The Center for Progressive Christianity, under the page for the second of their "eight points."

unknown “exorcist,” an unnamed healer, had apparently been traveling the countryside “*casting out demons*.” Whatever that may have meant biologically, medically for that pre-scientific world, the meaning is self-evident. To have been freed from a “demon,” whatever that may have been, could only have been a good thing. A liberating experience. A freeing expression of health and healing and wholeness and peace. And surely that is what God wants... so, by all means, let’s stop him! He’s not “one of us.”

It is truly incredible that such a story as this has made it into the canon of sacred literature. Isn’t it? That any disciple of Jesus could be so bigoted ought to send a shiver of shame down our spines. That membership into the club of “us” could ever trump someone’s salvation is an embarrassment to the very name of Jesus. And that a writer of a gospel could dare to leave such an inane example in his account is almost unbelievable. But to their credit, the gospel writers never shied from telling the truth – even if it was embarrassing – and they had no apparent need to paint over the heroes of faith with a kind of rose-tinted glasses. Perhaps in telling such an honest story, we are more able to see ourselves in it.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith was sent by the United Church of Canada to Karachi, Pakistan, to serve as a missionary. When Smith arrived, enthusiastic and energetic, rather than confronting a godless culture he was confronted by God-fearing and devout disciples, who prayed five times every day and who annually gave themselves to the discipline of a month-long fast. In their lives he saw a people who experienced, personally, profoundly, the presence of God. He called his sending agency to report the good news: the Muslims to whom he had been sent, in order to bring them to God, already knew God! Intensely. Intimately. Powerfully. In his youthful naiveté Smith expected his report to be met with some word of encouragement and praise. Instead, his superiors determined that he had lost his missionary zeal, that he had, in fact, lost his faith.

This disheartening experience, in part, fueled Smith's lifelong quest for truth, and led him to become one of the world's experts in comparative religious studies, and a renowned leader in Christian/Muslim dialogue. "Why would a mission house be upset that people were already in a relationship with God? Why would they be upset that people were already praying, already fasting, already leading a spiritual life?" Because, sadly, as John has already told us, they were "not following us."

Few leaders have ever been so bold and daring, so self-assured and confident, so mature in leadership and so filled with conviction as to be willing to say, "It's OK... Let them be them. Their way is fine... for *"Anyone who is not against us is for us."* Wow! Such a statement can only be made out of an amazing maturity and a trust in the bigger picture – and in the God who is painting that picture, one vibrant color after another.

I'm looking for a new, used truck. Do you know that not a single dealer with whom I have spoken has said, "Did you try my competitor? They sell trucks, too!" *Anyone who is not against us is for us.* Hmm. Really!?

In his commentary on this text, Halford Luccock says,

These words of Jesus... are a rebuke to all our blind exclusiveness, our arrogant assumptions that God's action in the world is limited to the forms with which we are familiar. "Something there is that does not love a wall." It is the mind of God. The church has suffered terribly, and the world has suffered terribly, from this fence-building frenzy. If one tenth of the time which Christians have devoted to building fences had gone into building roads as a highway for God, the world would be a far better place today.<sup>4</sup>

Are you building fences, or bridges, in your life? And what role does your faith play? Does your reading of scripture underwrite a narrow, judging, parochial view of the world? Does it draw lines that divide, or lines that connect? Does it convince you that you are right and they are wrong, or that God's world is a wide, wonderful place, that God makes even more beautiful

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<sup>4</sup> Halford E. Luccock, *The Interpreter's Bible*, "Mark," p.790.

through the diversity of culture and thought and religious variety? Does your reading of scripture cause you to be wary or to welcome? To fend off or to reach out? To be sure, scripture can be used for either purpose. How, then, are we to understand our scriptures? Let us not look for proof-texts for our own prejudices, but let us seek to follow the example and the Way of the one who always praised honest faith, and who found that faith in the most surprising of places.

I believe I am correct to suggest that never did Jesus cite an example of faith among the expected, among the religious establishment – which in his day was the Jewish establishment. (I have no doubt that today he would be casting his criticism on the Christian community which had used/misused his name for 2,000 years.) He found faith in a Syrophonecian Woman, an outsider who was not “one of us” (Mark 7). He found faith in a Centurion, a Roman leader, a pagan, by Jewish standards. Not “one of us” (Luke 7). He praised an infidel, a backslider, a member of that hated band who were accused of weakening the purity of faith by their intermarriage and accommodation to the culture. But in a Samaritan, whom he called “good,” he found more faith than in the pious leaders of his own religion. The Samaritan was not “one of us” (Luke 10). Not one of ours.

But Jesus said the Samaritan was one of his!

How will we learn Jesus’ maturity? We must begin by looking inward, by studying our own tradition, by learning our own scripture, by practicing the faith of Jesus that we might better know Jesus. Maybe you need to reconsider your own commitments – to work and worship, to play and prayer, to silence and service. That which draws us closer to God, which, in our faith tradition, comes through the life and witness of Jesus Christ, will also draw us closer to those who share our convictions – even if those convictions are packaged in different religious trappings.

And we need to continue to look for ways to be in partnership. The Baptist Peace Fellowship can teach us to grow up in our understandings of peace and justice. The Alliance of Baptists offers us opportunities to connect across this nation in a network of worship and service. The North Carolina Council of Churches, who has served across this state for 75 faithful years, bringing together Christians of common conviction, if uncommon denominational practice, can teach us the value of ecumenical participation. And Mecklenburg Ministries can lead us to bridge the many divisions among Charlotte's population, by putting us together with people of different racial and social and religious experience. Maybe you need to reach out to grow up?

In our last "listening session" in our home, someone said, "Can I ask a kind of crazy question? Do churches ever consider merging?" Because I'd been studying this text, it made me wonder what it would be like to reach out, not to people who were just like us, but to create an intentional merger of Baptists and Bahais, Jesuits and Jews, Muslims and Methodists. What would happen if we could convince some of those good folk, who are "*casting out demons*" in their own way, to come together? What would happen to our own understandings if we were to share, say, a mission budget for a year? What would we achieve? How would it teach us, all, to grow up?

I'm still just dreaming. Thinking out loud. Trying to listen. So eager to grow up, personally, and as part of a community of faith. In the article I've already quoted, Tom Thresher adds this:

I invite you to imagine church leaders standing side by side with leading scientists, artists, multinational executives and government leaders proffering enlightened perspectives on the issues of the day. Imagine our most visible religious spokespersons not condemning the modern world from atop their backward-pointing magical-mythical pulpits, but pointing forward as respected advisors in matters of the utmost importance. Imagine congregations across the country actively challenging Christianity to "grow-up" into its modern and postmodern possibilities and beyond. Imagine a catechism leading the way into increasingly expansive ways of knowing and leading in the world. Now wouldn't that be a startling vision for the 21st century church?

That's who I want us to be. A church that is living fully in its context. Digging down deeply into its own tradition, but reaching out, without the confining limitations of dogma or denomination – reaching out into this community, and beyond, to join hands with all those who in their work have already joined hands in the life-saving, soul-enriching, world-changing work of Jesus.

I want us to grow up!

May it be so!