

“Faith Five—for the Ultimate Child and You”

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Kick-off Sunday 9-9-18

Based upon Deut. 11:1-7, 16-21; Luke 14:15-24

“Why are you so totally absorbed in trying to make money? Why do you not devote more time to prayer and Torah study?” asks “the Rabbi of Pscizche” in a teaching story told by another rabbi and psychologist named Abraham Twerski. The man responds, “You see Rabbi, *I* really do not require that much to live on, but I must work to provide for my family, especially my *child* and his future.” Years go by and that child becomes a grown man. He too, becomes engrossed in worldly pursuits. “Why do you not take time out to further your spiritual growth?” the Rabbi of Pscizche asks the now-grown son. The man answers, “I cannot, Rabbi. For although I do not need much for myself, I must think of my child, and his future.” Then his child grows up, and the story repeats itself generation after generation. No one has adequate time to live according to his beliefs because everyone must provide for his child, and so on. “Somewhere, then,” the Rabbi exclaims in the end, “perhaps at the end of time, we will find that ultimate child, for whose welfare countless generations have so toiled that they’ve neglected their own values in the process. Where is that ultimate child? Is he not but a fiction? A non-existent end-point? An illusion that has driven the entire world into an insane striving toward futility?”¹

That story has been haunting me since I read it for the first time earlier this summer because it makes me feel defensive and convicted simultaneously. Maybe it does you too? What could be more important and less futile than providing for the needs of our children? These men aren’t being profligate; they are being good parents. Yet then again, what could be more important for our children than learning how to live in relationship with God from parents who do? And if we are busy all the time in worldly pursuits, is it really because our children need all the things we provide? Who or what is it that we are really serving?

If we were to ask these questions of the people invited to the party in Jesus’ parable, they would solidly come down on the side of the parents in the Ultimate Child story. They were not busy in trivial or immoral pursuits. One was in the middle of a real estate transaction that needed to close. One was in the middle of trying to break in a new team of oxen, most likely to help him in his farming business. One was just married and investing all of his time in building a new life with his bride. Yet it is pretty clear from the end of the parable that Jesus thought the invitees chose poorly. “None of those who were first invited will taste my dinner,” the king says in the end. So where does that leave us then?

I hope that it doesn’t leave us feeling guilty or defensive again. There is no reason to think that the king was retaliating against or even judging his guests. His remark could have just as easily been a statement of fact, “They aren’t going to be there because they said ‘too busy,’” or a statement of disappointment, “None of them will taste the dinner!” The point of both the Ultimate Child story and this one is not to make us feel bad. It is to make us think about our lives and priorities. What are we missing when we allow busyness to keep us from dining with our

¹ This is an edited for length version of the story told in Lozoff, Bo, [Deep & Simple: A Spiritual Path for Modern Times](#) (Durham: The Human Kindness Foundation, 1999), 74-75.

king? What are we missing giving our children when we say “not now” to God because we are working to provide our children other material things? What will future generations miss because of our choices?

We live during a time when growing numbers of people are saying “not now” to tending to their relationship with God. Although 75% of Americans surveyed in a 2016 Barna Group Study self-identified as Christians, when those same people were asked whether they actively “practiced” their faith by attending a religious service at least once a month, or reading the Bible outside of Church, the number dropped precipitously.² Only 31% attend worship once a month or more. Only 34% read the Bible outside of Church. The percentage of those practicing Christianity differed so greatly from the percentage of those professing faith that the Barna Group decided to delve deeper by creating a third category they called “Post-Christians.” Post-Christians were those who professed their faith, but who also answered “no” to at least 9 of 15 statements which had to do with faith and practice, such as: “Have you prayed in the past year, given money to a church, volunteered at a church, attended Sunday school or a small group, or shared your faith in the past year?” Based upon their responses, 48% of the original 75% who self-identified as Christian were actually “Post-Christians” according to Barna.³

This isn’t good, but perhaps surprisingly, it also isn’t as new of a problem as we may think. As we heard in the Old Testament lesson today, God warned the Hebrew slaves that when they moved into the Promised Land they would be tempted to abandon Yahweh’s way, and be seduced to following other gods. “Put these words of mine in your heart and soul, bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,” God says in the passage. “Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down, and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house, and on your gates so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth.” (Deuteronomy 11:18-21). If those words sound vaguely familiar to you, it’s probably because they are almost identical to the more famous words in *Deuteronomy* Chapter 6, which are known in Judaism as “the Great Commandment” or the *Shema*. This repetition is significant, according to Old Testament expert Walter Brueggemann. The more times instructions are repeated in the Old Testament, the safer it is to assume that the people were not following them.⁴

This is particularly true when it comes to instructions in *Deuteronomy* because the text was written as a kind of “what we wish we had done” book, centuries after the rest of the Torah. Begun during the 7th Century B.C.E., when King Josiah was trying to reform Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria, *Deuteronomy* was written by the law keepers, the priests, and the scribes, in an attempt to repackage ancient history with the benefit of hindsight. In other words, it is more advocacy than history. We know from history that the early Israelites were seduced by other gods. We know from history that they did not practice their faith with as much enthusiasm as they pursued commercial prosperity and power in the Promised Land. The

² “*The State of the Church 2016*,” Research Release in Faith & Christianity, Sept. 15, 2016, retrieved from <https://www.barna.com/research/state-church-2016>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Brueggemann, Walter, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 139.

Deuteronomist historians believed it was this behavior which led to the kingdom's downfall. So the whole book was really a summons to future generations to practice covenant living more faithfully than ancient Israel originally had.

According to today's text, faithfulness begins with doing three things. The first thing is to own your place in the story. "It's not your children who must acknowledge God's greatness, it is you," today's text advises. The Israelites in Josiah's day needed to embrace the Exodus story as if it were their own story, not the story of their ancestors. The idea was that once they did this, they would appreciate how God had liberated them and blessed them, and be filled with love for God. Then that love would inspire them to obey God. So the next step is to keep all of God's commandments out of love and gratitude for all that God has done. Once our faith is solid, the final step is to pass it on. This is where the *Shema* comes in, with its instructions to the Israelites to put the word of God everywhere – on their heads and arms, on gates and doorways etc. "Talk about your faith and my teachings each day throughout the day," God commanded. "Live and breathe the covenant." Doing this would ensure both that the Israelites would be able to resist the temptation to worship idols, and that there would be future generations of Israelites who knew the story as their own as well. Then all God's people would live in and experience the abundance of God's kingdom on earth.

As Christians we do not take this passage quite as literally as Orthodox Jews do, requiring people to wear *teffilim*, the little boxes with Scripture in them on their arms and heads when they pray, or put *mezuzahs* on our doorways. But we do still take these instructions seriously because they point to how important it is to incorporate into our routines external practices that strengthen our internal faith.

You are here, so you already take the instructions more seriously than 48% of so-called Christians. But when it comes to how we practice and share our faith, we may still have to change in order to preserve the faith for future generations because the younger generations today do not learn the way the older generations did. This summer those of us involved in Christian education and spiritual development in the church have been learning all about this thanks to a book by a Lutheran pastor, Dr. Rich Melheim, with the provocative title, Let's Kill Sunday School (before it kills the church).⁵ Melheim has observed that people in Generation X and older, which is most of us here, were raised to learn primarily by passively listening and watching. But younger generations have been raised with iPads and the Internet. They are used to searching for what they deem interesting and relevant, posting questions and comments, interacting with video games, jumping from hyperlink to hyperlink as they become intrigued or bored.

One consequence of this shift is that twenty- and thirty-somethings are less interested in traditional church. Another is that the Sunday school models which worked historically, in which children were segregated by age away from their parents during worship, in order to learn the faith by listening to a teacher or memorizing lessons, no longer works. The stories don't feel real or relevant to the kids. So when more engaging sports and other secular opportunities call, the

⁵ Melheim, Rich, Let's Kill Sunday School (before it kills the church) (Lewistown: Creative Outlet, 2014).

younger generation chooses those. Others who do stick around while they are young, leave once they are expected to attend worship instead of Sunday school because they don't know how to worship or feel connected to the larger church community and its mission.

A more effective strategy according to Melheim and the many churches which have successfully adopted his method, is making learning holistic, interactive, and constant in and outside the church. Just as the model in *Deuteronomy* does, the new model starts in the home, not the church. When parents, grandparents, and others model making practicing their faith a part of their daily routine, and when they make talking about God's word a daily practice so the relevance of the teachings is brought home, then everyone's faith deepens. Then the church nurtures this ongoing discipleship development through multi-generational worship and study, as well as opportunities to mix worship and education together in creative, interactive ways.

Melheim's 21st Century equivalent of the *Shema* is a practice he calls "*Faith 5*."⁶ Faith 5 is a daily devotional form of Christian fellowship and Bible study. You begin by making time each day to share your emotional or spiritual highs and lows with your children, your spouse, your friends, or on your own in a journal. Then you read the scripture lessons for the upcoming worship service. Each day you discuss those verses, using provided questions as guides. Then you pray together for each other about the highs and lows, and the lesson if it feels relevant, and bless each other. This can be done as a bedtime ritual with children, first thing in the morning, or over a meal with older loved ones—basically whenever you can fit in a 15-30 minute time together. Couples and families who do this find that their faith and their relationships both are strengthened. They also find worship is more meaningful for everyone because they have been thinking about the text all week, not just the pastor.

This fall, we are all going to have a chance to deepen our faith and relationships this way, thanks to some exciting additions and changes we are adding to our programming. First, everyone is now invited, regardless of whether you have young children or not, to adopt a Faith 5 practice at home. Every week we will provide worksheets like the one you received today with the upcoming week's lessons. Most Sundays we will have only a few paper copies for non-computer people to save trees, but we will e-blast the same handouts to everyone on Mondays. One way or the other, you will get a worksheet with the week's texts and questions on it. This will allow you to adopt the 5-step daily practice. If you can't do it daily because of your busyness, then do it however many times you can.

Then on Sunday mornings beginning next week, we will begin to adopt the practices as a multi-generational community. All ages are invited to gather in the sanctuary from 10:00-10:20 a.m. to share highs and lows from the past week, and prepare our hearts and minds for worship. Then after worship, there will be a second time when, after getting a cup of coffee and snack, people can return to the sanctuary to discuss as a community any questions that the sermon or their home study of the text raised. We hope these conversations will also be multi-generational. But there will be nursery care for little ones available for parents who prefer that. Those same little ones will also be given their first lessons in faith and the Bible in the

⁶ See www.faith5.org.

nursery during worship, through a new program of biblical storytelling with toys led by Kyera Hooks. For older kids in worship, we will have worksheets which enable them to follow and appreciate worship more.

The last addition is a new kind of worship about 6 times a year, when there are five Sundays in a month. On those fifth Sundays, we will have a more interactive service for all ages I am calling "Dialogue Church." In this service, instead of me preaching and you listening, we will together have a conversation about the text. Children and youth will play a greater role in worship, and everyone will have ways beyond repeating words and prayers to affirm and engage their faith. This will be a new experience for all of us. It may stretch us as frozen chosen Presbyterians. But it will be a chance for us to explore relating to God and each other in community in ways that are both meaningful and exercise our discipleship muscles. With the Spirit's help, I think they will also be fun.

No one will be required to participate in these new programs. We will not be collecting weekly homework or taking attendance at the share and discuss times before and after worship. We will still be offering educational classes before worship and at various other times throughout the year for those who enjoy small group study. And although we will be offering Dialogue church about 5-6 times in the next year, we have no plans to change the traditional service radically the rest of the Sundays. But I hope that everyone will give these new spiritual formation opportunities a try because I think if you do, both your own faith life, and that of the community will benefit.

Whether we are parents of young children, empty-nesters, single workaholics, or retirees, we are all busy. The demands on our time are great, and not all frivolous. But there really is nothing more important than our nurturing our relationship with God if what we seek is to benefit ourselves, our children, and the world. The closer we are to God, and the more God's story feels like our story, the more abundant our lives feel and the more passionate and effective our service and witness. So join me this year in making the time to taste the feast each day. It is the best way to ensure that your faith will remain strong, your loved ones will get your very best, and even the ultimate child will know well the abundance of God. Amen.