

“Faith that Sticks and Floats”

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Based upon Deut. 4:9-14; Matt. 14:22-33

“Take care,” the author of *Deuteronomy* wrote, “and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen, nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.” Although these words are set during the time of the exodus, put in the mouth of Moses so as to introduce to the newly-minted people of Israel the importance of the Ten Commandments, the instructions were actually written centuries after that event, after everything had fallen apart. The long-dreamt of Promised Land had been claimed, corrupted, and lost, and the people were in exile. Far from home, the Deuteronomistic historians felt charged with preserving the history and theology of Judaism during that time, and edited the history to make it clear to the people who would one day return home how and why everything had gone wrong, so it wouldn’t go wrong again. They wanted everybody to hold onto their faith in Yahweh— even in the midst of extreme adversity— so that the old dream of living with God in the Promised Land could become new again.

In the Church, we share the hopes and ideals of historians like these. We want the Church to grow and thrive in the future and Christians to know and serve the Lord even in the face of hardship. So, every year we rededicate ourselves to learning about the Gospel and discipleship and passing these lessons on to our children on Kick-off Sunday, the day that traditionally marked the beginning of the Sunday school year. In this church, for the last few years we have focused on learning in both traditional and new ways. Our littlest disciples have learned on Sunday mornings through Godly play, while our teens learned on Sunday nights through a youth group called the God Squad, designed to enable them to become worship leaders, mission partners, and pastorally supportive members of the community. Adults have learned during the week as well as on Sundays, and families have embraced inter-generational learning at home by practicing a weekly spiritual development discipline called “Faith 5,” in which all ages practice a daily ritual together of reading and discussing the biblical texts on which I will be preaching, praying, talking about their faith, and blessing one another.

The pandemic has not stopped these vital educational ministries. This fall we are still offering spiritual development opportunities for all ages, which, I, as your pastor, encourage you to avail yourselves of through Zoom, supplied activity kits, and Faith 5. But as a parent who knows all too well what parenting a young child during the pandemic involves, even as I say this I can also almost hear through the ether the groans of parents out there, who are already fried from having to figure out how to balance the demands of virtual school and virtual childcare with real work, shopping, and everything else: “Don’t you dare ask me to do one more thing to teach my child. I don’t have time. I don’t have the mental energy. I don’t want anyone telling me I have to get my kid to Zoom for still another hour during the week, or that we have to find a way to read lessons together. I want my child to know and love God, but something’s got to give. So thanks, but we’re going to sit out this fall.”

I get it; I really do— believe me! Yet the very fact that the world is such a mess means that it is more important than ever that we ensure that our children do not forget what matters most. We need to be sure that they know Jesus is with them, and what he stands for so that belief in God and goodness and serving neighbor does not become still one more casualty of our chaotic world. The statistics aren't good these days about young people holding onto and continuing in the faith of their parents. When they move away, they tend to fall away from the Church and God. So, how do we instill in our children what Dr. Kara Powell and Dr. Chap Clark called “sticky faith,” in their hit book by the same name?¹ How do we instill the kind of faith that can survive both crises and growing up and moving out, the kind of faith that is deep enough to inform their sense of identity and strong enough to influence their actions and world view?

Well, the good news for tired, strung-out parents is that according to Powell and Clark, who researched the topic extensively, sticky faith does not come from us drilling into our children what Dallas Willard called, “the gospel of sin management,”² in other words, the idea that being faithful is all about avoiding the behaviors that get you in trouble with God. It doesn't come from teaching our children doctrine or forcing them to memorize Scripture either, although those things are not bad things to do. That means that none of us has to add teaching in those ways to our home parenting to-do lists. But sticky faith in children does come from parents passing their faith in a different way. It comes from parents consistently modeling trust in God, living God's truth, finding their own identities in their calling to serve God, and talking about all of this with their children. It comes from older Christians nurturing our own faith and our relationship with God in such an organic and visible way that we model for our children how faith can carry us through life transitions, challenges, and storms.³

Of course, in order to model this kind of faith, you have to have it first, and that's the kicker for many of us. We don't feel our faith is strong enough. I can't tell you how many times people have told me that they feel inspired or connected with God in worship, but by that afternoon, it all seems to have disappeared into a puff of smoke, replaced by the frustrations and demands of life and the doubts and fears of the heart. Like the people of Israel, we can remember God's goodness and priorities for a little while, but then those memories start to slip away; or like Peter, who bravely marched out on the water at Jesus' bidding, we have our moments of strong faith, but then the winds starts to blow, our toes start to get wet and cold, and we suddenly think, “Was I crazy to believe?” or “I don't have time for this,” and start sinking. How can we model sticky faith if we can't consistently sustain our own?

It's not a new problem. One of the earliest images of Jesus in existence is a fragment of a wall painting which was near a baptismal basin in a house church in Dura-Europa, (what we now call modern Syria). Dating to around 240 C.E., the image, which looks as if it were drawn by a child in Sunday school, depicts today's gospel lesson. There is a boat with disciples in it on water. Near the boat, out on the water are two characters: one is reaching out to the other as his finds himself ankle-deep in water. The other figure is standing on the water reaching back to

¹ Powell, Kara E. And Clark, Chap, [Sticky Faith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

² *Ibid*, 34.

³ *Ibid*, 13-66.

him. But time has damaged the painting so all that remains of him in the wall fragment are his feet. The Yale University Art Gallery, which holds the fragment, identifies the whole figure as Jesus and the half figure as Peter.⁴ But anyone who has read the story knows it has to be the other way around. Peter was the one sinking, not Jesus, and it is probably because of Peter, as much as the water in the story, that this image was included near a baptismal basin. After we have been marked and claimed by Jesus in baptism, we all have to figure out how to head out into the world and keep from sinking. In those days, the newly baptized, who were mostly adults, could at least look at the reminder image on the wall and see the whole of Jesus. They could look into his eyes as he reached out to Peter and remember that he was reaching out to them too. But now all we can see is a damaged image of someone's feet. Would you step out of boat in a storm if you couldn't see clearly who was calling you out there? Do you?

The disciples thought the person on the water was a ghost until Jesus called out to them with the name of God that we considered last week. "I AM," Jesus said, which the NRSV translated "It is I" to sound more conversational. But it was those words "I AM," that pronouncement of divine identity and authority I think, that made Peter do the crazy thing he did. Only God could have made him get out of the boat at that moment, so he said, "Lord, if it is you (in other words, if you really are the great I AM), command me to come out there on the water." Jesus did and sure enough Peter got out immediately. He walked on the water over to Jesus as if he had been doing it his whole life. But then the winds picked up enough to spray his cheeks with water or blow his hair in his eyes, and that was enough to make him question his own actions. He grew afraid of the storm and the impossibility of what Jesus and he were doing, and started to sink. Peter's fear interfered with his ability to trust Jesus and focus on what was possible to accomplish with him.

These days there is a lot of wind around to make us start to sink too. The news every day can hit you like a hurricane, making Jesus appear more like a phantom than a strong, concrete help. The demands of working and parenting and schooling right now are like gale force winds, which interfere with one's ability to think, be still, trust, or breathe. And then of course there are always the less-than-gentle, but ever-present breezes of science and culture which make us question parts of Scripture and doctrine, the problem of human suffering which makes us doubt, and the fears which make the ideas of goodness triumphing over evil, and miracles happening seem impossible. If we want to stay afloat through all of this, we need to have some kind of reminder system that Jesus is God and God is larger and more powerful than the storms that threaten.

I wear a Fitbit every day that reminds me ten minutes before each hour that I need to get up and walk around a bit in order to be healthy. But most of us do not have an equivalent device that prompts us to do things to strengthen our faith. According to Powell and Clark, parents are supposed to be the spiritual Fitbits for their children. But that leaves parents needing a prompter of their own. The Church is designed to be that prompter. Every time we make the time for regular worship, daily prayer, Bible study, every time we work to care for others in mission, we

⁴ Miller, Lynn, "Matthew 14:22-33: Walking on Water: An Early Image," Art & Faith Matters Blog, posted Aug. 3, 2014 at <https://artandfaithmatters.blogspot.com/2014/08/walking-on-water-early-image.html>

are reminded of God's blessings and teachings. We do these things repeatedly because we need repeated promoting. Once is not enough to make our faith sticky. But during this time when we are mostly out of the church building, making the traditional prompts feel less compelling for some, I want to suggest an additional approach to tackling the problem of sinking feet that you can do from your homes and offices and everywhere else outside of the church. It doesn't replace the other stuff, but it can meet the need for prompting in a different way.

One of the core messages of the Gospel is what scholars call the "in-breaking of the kingdom." Even when the waters roar, even when it feels like the world is a disaster, the Gospel proclaims that God is with us and that God's reign is visible if we look for it. So, here's the spiritual discipline I think we all should be practicing now in addition to the classic ones, or instead of it if you can't do the classic ones: looking for the in-breaking of the kingdom each day. We all can do it from wherever we are. We can do it with kids or alone. It is an exercise in cultivating trust. Kick off today the daily practice of asking yourself and your loved ones: "Where did you see God today? Where did you feel God's presence upholding you?" If, on the worst of days, you can get to the point that you can say to your children, "I think God was in the way we all started laughing after the washer flooded the laundry room and we all slipped at the same time trying to clean up the mess. God was present with me giving me strength to finish my report in record time between Zoom calls. God was in the nap that gave me strength, the bird outside my window that gave me hope, the friendly phone call that interrupted my isolation with love, and the Scripture passage I saw when I opened the Bible that seemed written just for me." If you can teach your eyes to find Christ in the storm, to see at least his feet, then you will model for others in a compelling and sticky way the kind of faith that can transform darkness into day.

Once you can do that, the other thing to work on is stepping out of the boat. God has commanded that we all do this. God has blessed every living human being with gifts that can make the kingdom of God more visible on earth. This is our purpose— to walk with Christ, using those gifts for the good of all and the glory of the kingdom. So instead of making faith about "have-to's" for your children, try explaining that it's about "get-to's" or "made-to's." Say to them, "Look, God is giving us a chance to help that person;" or "When I sort books I feel happy because I know I am doing the mission God made me good at;" or "I've notice what a great listener you are. Have you thought about whether God might want you to make the world better through your listening? Maybe God wants you to comfort others?" Everyone wants to know what his or her divine purpose is on earth. Make your life and your children's lives about discovering and fulfilling your purpose in the kingdom, and you may find, as millions of Christians through the ages have before you, that when you know what your role is, God will give you the strength to do it even when it's hard. You will be able to step out of the boat because you will know that it is in those moments that you, like Peter, are closest to Jesus.

In movies, when they want to make someone appear as if he or she is walking on water, they put a clear plexiglass shelf just underneath the water. It's a shame we don't all have that kind of concrete support under our feet when we are caught in storms. But as a 17-year old boy named Kevin, who was blessed with sticky faith because of the example of his parents, discovered, even if we can't feel it, it is still there. Kevin's parents were killed in a car accident on the night they went out to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. Suddenly Kevin found

himself caring for his two younger siblings, making funeral arrangements, and speaking at his parents' service— basically doing what seemed impossible. When his Pastor Tim Forbes asked him how he was experiencing God in the midst of the great tragedy and all those challenges, Kevin replied: “I see God as my shelf; everything on it has been moved around, changed or broken and I know that it is always going to be different and changing, more now than ever before. But the shelf that I can put everything on hasn't changed. God is still the same.”⁵ This is what we all need to remember and what we need to share with our children and their children so that our future will be bright. This is how to stay afloat in a storm. Practice looking for God each day, and serving God out of love and trust, not obligation and fear, until you can feel that the shelf is under your feet all the time. It's there for all of us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁵ *Animating Illustrations*, cf. “Sustain” at HomileticsOnline, <https://www.homileticsonline.com/illustrations>, citing a sermon by Timothy Forbes entitled, “*Rearranging God's Shelf*.”