

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/22/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

Lately I've been thinking a lot about church growth and direction. Actually, I think about these things all the time, but I have been especially lately. So, I've decided to share some of those thoughts with you that you might be more aware of the dynamics of the church, present and future.

A mother once said to me, "I'm not going to make my children go to Sunday School or church. I'm going to wait until they are old enough and then let them decide for themselves if they want to believe in Jesus."

I replied, "Based on what?"

Certainly, each individual should have the freedom to decide if and how God will be a part of their life. But that decision can't really be made if the person has not been introduced to God and God's vision and mission for the individual and the world. Scripture repeatedly assures us that salvation comes on the basis of faith alone. Faith isn't something that just happens. No one wakes up one day and says, "Today, I think I'll start believing in God." Faith is a relationship with God that has to be cultivated over a long period of time. Like a friendship that begins superficially with one or a few initial encounters and then blossoms after many interactions, faith grows over time as you learn about God, come to trust God, and return that trust by sharing parts of your life. Again, that can't happen unless the relationship is cultivated regularly and frequently.

When I meet with parents and sponsors before baptism, I tell them that baptism is not "eternal life insurance." There are many who think that if you've been baptized, then you're all set. But it is not baptism that saves us; it is faith. Jesus tells us that, "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will perish." Salvation hinges, not on baptism, but on belief, on faith alone. Baptism is an outward sign of the faith of the individual or the faith of those who promise to raise their child in faith. It is the role of parents and sponsors to help cultivate that faith relationship in their baptized child. In infant baptism, those who bring a child for baptism are asked to make a commitment, "to live with the child among God's faithful people, to bring her/him to hear the word of God and participate in the holy supper, to teach him/her the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, to place in her/his hands the Holy Scriptures, and to nurture him/her in faith and prayer. These commitments are best fulfilled at home and at the church in which the parents choose to raise their child. The members of the congregation also make a commitment through their welcome to the child in the baptismal service—to support the parents and sponsors in carrying out those commitments I just listed. Congregations do this by providing worship services which include the word and the sacrament, by offering instruction in the faith for both children and the adults who will be the primary teachers, and by providing opportunities for interaction with others who believe. This is a powerful covenant made by parents and sponsors, the congregation, and by God who, in baptism, adopts the child as God's own, and then returns the child to the parents to raise as best their able the way God would want the child brought up.

We all share in the making of disciples as we support our church and develop relationships with all those who come, as well as inviting others to join in our fellowship. In part, it is a witness to the faith that was cultivated within us as we grew up (though for some, coming to faith happens later in life). It

is also a legacy that we leave as we contribute time, talents, and resources to instill faith in the lives of others. The sharing of faith is one of the most fundamental activities of the Christian, following the practice of worship. We come to church to be equipped to answer the questions of others so that we can help them to grow in the faith that we ourselves have received and claimed as our own.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey