

Youth Sunday - Maturing Faith

Matthew 15:21-28

Mitch Gore and representatives of NPC Youth Ministry
Sunday, May 7, 2006
Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Good morning. This is Youth Sunday and someone suggested that we might call this “Godparents Sunday.” So I hope you see the youth here. They are our youth. All of ours. They are part of the family of God and we can celebrate that. This morning I just wanted to speak briefly to the text and then let you hear some of the young folks talk about their faith journey.

In the narrative this morning, we don’t see the woman’s journey. She is thrust into Jesus and the disciples’ journey. She came crying out to Jesus and his disciples over a daughter who is tormented by a demon. The woman faces Jesus’ silence. She faces Jesus’ narrow mission to only the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The woman faces even Jesus referring to her as a dog. This woman was not a Jew. She was loud and she did not fit their mission profile. Yet she persevered. She addresses Jesus as “Lord,” “Son of David.” She cries out for mercy and for help. She bows down at Jesus’ feet. She acknowledges that perhaps she would take the crumbs from her master’s table. Jesus says “Woman, Great is your faith.” Was she baptized? Did she go through confirmation class? Where did she learn her theology? Did she have faith in the saving grace of Christ Jesus, the living son who died for the sin of the world? She did believe that Jesus could help her and her daughter. She believed also is that Jesus is where she should put her hope. Faith is a gift from God and as we go through life, our faith goes through a maturing process.

As we walk with Jesus through the peaks and valleys of life, we come to understand how incredibly wide and deep and high is the love and the grace of God. Now if we take a look at the disciples in this brief encounter, they don’t show very well. All they want to do is send the woman away because she is annoying them. Where is their compassion? The disciples at times don’t understand God’s kingdom or Jesus’ teaching but he continues to teach them and walk with them on the journey to faith.

I feel like I relate more often to the disciples, who don’t get it. More than the woman of great faith, I’m often annoyed and bothered by the things in life that God puts there to test me, or to use me as Jesus’ example. Our journey of faith with Jesus is one that continues for all of eternity. We continue to grow and mature in our faith. It’s a maturing faith, not a mature faith. Will we ever get there? Or is it a process for the rest of our lives?

This morning you will hear from some young disciples on their journey. I’m excited to introduce 4 seniors. Ben Johanes is a senior at St. Alban School. Chiso Chanthuna is a senior at Albert Einstein High School. Emily Fare is a senior at Winston Churchill High School. Daniel Gonowers is a senior at Richard Montgomery High School. Be encouraged.

There are a lot of you. Wow! Alright, my name is Ben Johanes and I’m a senior at St. Alban High School and next year I’ll be attending the University of Maryland. Ok, now I’m not going to be able to give you a sad story about my life and how faith has helped me through because quite frankly, my life has been pretty good! That’s not to say I haven’t had problems. We’ve all had problems. But other than the occasional set-back here and there, my journey through life has been made easy through a number of groups including my family, friends, church family, and countless others along the way so instead I’ll be happy.

Way back in the day, which was a Sunday, in case you were wondering, I used to go to Sunday school. I still do, but I used to also. But back then, Jesus was always this tall, friendly bearded fellow who loved children and was born to humble beginnings. He rose to fame and success because he was smart and kept the attention of the masses. He was kind of the ancient Palestine version of the American dream minus the car and house. For those of you that have seen Kevin Smith’s satire “Dogma,” Jesus to me was like the buddy Jesus. And for those of you who haven’t, buddy Jesus is a statue that looks like this. (points) He was really just a super good guy who also happened to save humanity from all their sins. Now, while Jesus

was a nice bearded guy, God was a huge floating head. To me, God was like Zordon, the all-powerful floating head from the Power Rangers, except God was even better. While Zordon bestowed the Power Rangers with all their powers, God created the heavens and the earth in, count them, seven days. That's pretty impressive.

But beyond that, God was pretty distant to me and although the Holy Trinity had been explained to me, I felt like Jesus and the good Lord were two pretty different individuals. Now I'm not really sure when my perception of Jesus and the Lord changed. I'm going to guess it was when I started having more "pressing issues" which was 6th grade for me. But suddenly God changed from a floating head to an entity that was omnipotent and Jesus became a bearded man that had some sad times too. He worked some miracles and whatnot and he was really a part of God. But more importantly it was around that time that I started to grasp the scope of what Jesus had done for us.

It says in John's gospel "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but attain an everlasting life." That's pretty incredible. He sacrificed his son and he literally put him through hell in order to save a group of people who really hadn't done much for him in return. Can you imagine how hard this must have been? Now, remember a few things. First, God didn't have to do this. He's all-powerful. He doesn't need the human race to satisfy him.

Second, it's not only his offspring that he's sacrificing, but also part of himself. And third, despite this great sacrifice, Jesus was despised by many people and had to endure a humiliating and painful death on the cross. And yet, God went ahead and did it anyway. Can any of you truthfully be able to say that you'd be willing to do that for a group of people who reject and deny you on a daily basis? I know I couldn't. That's why I'm not God. Most of us know what it's like to be loved by others, whether it's by parents, spouses, friends, co-workers. We all, at some point, have felt loved by another person. And I'm sure you all agree that knowing that someone cares about you and wants the best for you is a truly wonderful sensation.

Now I've been blessed by having people who have loved me. My family and friends have always been there for me when I needed them and that makes me luckier than most. A little bit of side note, enough people love me that on the website "facebook.com" I have a fan club that at its peak, had 93 members at St. Alban's. To put that in context, I had more people in my fan club than the Redskins Fan Club, the Rock's Fan Club and Ninja's Anonymous combined. And of course, this club was only open to St. Alban's students, so if it were open to everybody, who knows how many people would join. I mean, you would all join, wouldn't you? But even then, even though I have legions of fans around the world, nobody's love is more important to me than God's love. So no matter how flawed I am, and believe me, I am. (Shocking I know) God will still love me. He refuses to turn his back on me even though I've turned my back on him many, many times.

Now, it's easy (well, not that easy) to stand here and talk about God's love, but sometimes it's hard to see or feel the love of a being that is not right in front of you. So, how do I even know that God loves me? Well, two ways. Deeds and faith. I see God's love everyday working through others. I see it in my parents, who have helped me get to where I am today even though I haven't been the most grateful, on many occasions. God's love is in Mitch and Mr. Martin, wherever he is. And the rest of the youth leaders, who take time out of their busy weeks to nurture a bunch of crazy kids in their religious journeys. God's love is in my friends who stick around and keep me company even though they'd rather not sometimes. God's love is in John McCarthy, a man who has been very good to me for some time and the rest of the baseball y libros crew, who work to educate the inhabitants of Consuelo, a town in the Dominican Republic with an unemployment rate of 90%. God's love is in the courageous men and women of the Armed Forces, who work to defend our freedom on a daily basis. God's love truly is, everywhere.

Then people may ask, "How do you know it is God's love and not just people being nice?" Well, that's where faith comes in. It's my faith that let's me know that it is God's love at work and God's love is not something that can be proved scientifically or mathematically because quite frankly, that limits God's love and there is no limit to God's love. But if one has faith in God's love, one can feel God's pleasure. Now if you ask most people I know, they'll tell you that I'm almost always a happy person. I'm a content individual. That's not to say that I don't always try to improve my situation, but I'm usually at peace with

the universe. I've been asked, "Ben, how do you do it? How do you maintain the kindness and the pleasantness? Are you on crystal meth?" My answer is usually "No, I'm not on crystal meth.

And I maintain this state of happiness because I know it could always be worse. I could be going through life without God's love." But instead he's there for me and will always be there past the end of time. And that knowledge is a freeing thing. It allows me to live my life without hesitation or worry. As Dave Matthews and his band have said "Do what you will. Walk where you like. Do as you please. I'll back you up." God and his love will always be there to back me up.

In closing, I'll leave you with one thought. Since the good Lord had enough faith in humanity to give us Jesus, don't you think the least we could do is have a little faith in him? Thank you.

Good morning! My name is Chiso Chanthuna. I'm a senior at Albert Einstein High School and next year I'll be attending Trinity College here in Washington, DC. I've been going to church all my life. As a child, Sunday mornings were the best part of my week. I never knew what was really going on, but I knew when I would come, there would be a really cool story about a really cool guy and of course, snack. We moved to Montgomery County in 2000. My family and I were very excited. But that excitement came to a quick halt when my family got the news of my mother's father, my grandfather, passing away. I questioned so many things. I remember coming home and giving my mother a hug and seeing her breaking down. And that's when I lost it. And by it, I mean my hope and my faith. My mother is such a strong woman, and to see her break down like that broke me up. I didn't think anything would make this better, even though I hadn't seen my grandfather since I was young, I then felt closest to him. But to me, I felt it was too late. And of course, the only one I thought to blame was God.

Years passed and sadly it happened again. I thought that this person that we called "God" had let me down. My grandmother had now passed away too. Another loved one that I had never been introduced to, that I had to say goodbye. This time, it was my father's pain that broke my heart. I was too busy concentrating on my family's despair, that these two people who I knew briefly but loved deeply, were now with someone who truly loved them.

Last summer was the summer I was leading into my senior year. While everyone was having fun I felt that I was going to be absolutely bored because I had to go to the Dominican Republic. Now please don't get me wrong. That was just me thinking at the moment. I knew that it would be good for me, but thought I wouldn't be having as much fun as they were having here. And of course, like everybody else attending, I was devastated when Mitch told us that our cell phones would not be accompanying us on this trip. But now, I'm so glad I went because it not only helped me grow in my faith, but also in my honest love for people.

While we were there, we lived in the Pastor's home and were fed and woken up with smiles and hugs. Now that's only something I see in my house when everybody got enough sleep the night before. Along with helping with vacation bible school, we were able to participate in a medical clinic and the people there were very beautiful, kind and caring. Many of them had problems and needed help. I don't know the exact number of how many showed up, but I remember looking out the window and seeing the line grow rapidly down the street. I was set up to be a runner for a Dominican nurse who didn't speak very much English. Though it was a struggle to communicate, we managed to help a lot of people. I thought that it would be the last time I saw her, but I was wrong. Our last night in the DR was surprisingly very emotional for me. I knew it would be sad to leave, but I also knew I wanted to get back home to my cell phone. The church held a celebration for us on the last night. After all the singing and dancing, I felt a tap on my shoulder and when I turned around, I found it was a woman who was asking me to come outside for a minute. I didn't realize who she was at first, but then I realized that it was the same woman who I was partnered with during the medical clinic. She pulled me outside because she said she wanted to tell me something she had been working on since the medical clinic. She told me that she had a feeling that I was not only a beautiful person on the outside, but on the inside as well. She told me that she was very happy she met me and we were all brought here for a reason. We had been told that all trip but it hit me that night. I knew we had accomplished more than just the physical labor that we had provided. My tears started to flow when she gave me a hug, smiled and said goodbye.

Leaving the Dominican Republic was hard, but I guess coming home was even harder. I knew when I left that I wanted to hold onto the fun and friendships that I had made, but also the faith I had in God and for life that I got back when I was down there. The summer was fine and I was able to balance my friends, job, family and thankfully, my Lord. But it was the same year that brought my balancing act to a halt. Stress with friends, stress with school and work and of course, stress with family. I didn't know what to do. There were times when I just wanted to forget it all and be by myself and the effects of Senioritis weren't helping either. I felt that it was coming to the point that I felt nothing I was doing was right.

It was the second semester one day and everybody felt like it was a regular day. But walking down the halls, I saw the usual smiles start to disappear. I saw this happen 3 times this year. One, two, now three people we had to say goodbye to this year because they didn't feel their lives were worth living anymore. I only knew the 3 of them briefly, but it hit me harder and harder with each. Those "why" and "how" questions that I had when my grandparents had passed away were back, but this time I had no one to blame. I remember thinking "why did they do this?" "what brought them to this point?" and "why didn't they have anyone to talk to and what was lacking in them?" My parents always told me that when I had a problem, I needed to talk about it. They knew they weren't always the easiest to approach about certain things, but to me, no parent is, but they said to just make sure I got the help from somewhere because holding pain inside is never good. After thinking about this for some time, I knew what was lacking in their lives. It was the same thing lacking in mine. Looking back now on my life, the times I did not turn to God were times I did not have anyone to talk to and those hard times I needed him, he was there and was always ready to listen. It hurts me to know that these three people did not understand that they always have someone to talk to who would not judge them by their mistakes but would love them even more for coming to talk to him. I don't know where I will be going from here, who I will meet, who else I may lose, but everything I've learned on my journey so far tells me I must have faith. No hardball from life that is thrown my way will break my faith. I know my journey is not always going to a smooth ride, but I know He is with me, I trust Him, and I'm ready. Thank you.

Hello. I'm Emily Fare and next year I will be attending the University of Southern California in Los Angeles. Although I have known for quite some time that I would be asked to tell the story of my faith in front of this congregation today, "excited" would not be the word to describe my anticipation. I cringe at the idea of having to discuss my feelings in front of people I don't even know. I knew I would need to discuss the strength of my faith, but that would mean acknowledging that I have feelings about it. I can give great advice, provide a shoulder to cry on, and be sensitive to other people's emotions, but when asked to discuss anything personal, I freeze up. Expressing my feelings has never been my strong point. I would much rather hold things in and move on. I am, however, going to attempt to be real and personal with you here today.

On that note, two of the things that have strongly affected my life are my faith and my father's death. My father died of a brain tumor in December of 2003. Talking about these two topics is almost taboo to me. I find it very hard to talk about my father's death with anyone and I get furious and somewhat nauseous whenever the topic is brought up. My mother has learned to her disappointment, that in order to talk about my faith or even remotely about my father's death, I need to be bribed with a steak at one of my favorite restaurants. So how can I tell you how I've dealt with my father's death without that sweet aroma anywhere near me? Well I'm a stranger to no one here and I realize that not everyone goes through with what my family has been through with as much grace and love as we have. So I've decided that this is something that must be talked about.

I've grown up in the church my whole life and although there have been times where I've had to have been pried out of bed or woken up with a mysterious case of the Sunday sniffles so I could stay home and watch the morning cartoons, the relief of coming to church has never ceased to amaze me. I live in an area where everyone has a different background, different faith and different morals. And if I were to bring up something about my faith to one of my friends, the subject would almost immediately change. Sure my friends would call me "church girl" when I couldn't sleep over on Sunday nights but it was really hard for me to talk about my faith around them because they didn't understand the importance of it. I'm aware that talking about my faith is not a comfortable subject around my peers, so coming to church and learning that I'm not alone has helped my faith grow even stronger and has allowed me to lift that huge weight off of me of not being able to talk about my faith around my friends.

Although I don't feel I express my emotions and faith around many people, the way that people have seen me face difficult times has allowed them to see how strong my faith is and the pivotal role it has played in keeping me strong during this fairly large bump in the road in my life. One of the reasons my faith is strong is because I've seen God be active in my life. What are the chances that my best friend's mother would die of breast cancer a week before my father died of a brain tumor? I know that it was just one of the ways God was working to make my transition smoother.

During my father's two-year battle with cancer, I'm sure I would not be able to pinpoint the moment when faith made it so, but I never doubted that everything would turn out OK. I think that it also may be the strength of the faith of both my parents that have helped me in my faith journey. During my father's illness, he was a model to me that God is walking with you even through the most awful of times. And my mother's strength and her faith has continued to inspire me. So after dad died, I never got stuck in denial. I just let it happen and had faith that everything would continue to work out. Everyone reacts differently to death and I know that in my case, there was something inside of me that kept me going. Looking back now, I didn't resort to sitting in my room and wondering why this had happened to me. I decided to get out and go on and move on. This pull in strength that I received from the church once again made me feel comforted. For people to see that you have a strong faith does not mean that you need to proclaim your beliefs to them. It is also a strong witness to live every day with hope and faith and with the assurance that everything happens for a reason. There is nothing more comforting than knowing that you are in the hands of God. Thank you.

I am Danny Gonowers and next year I'll be attending the University of Maryland in College Park and this is my story. I'm graced enough to say that I've grown up in the church. My parents are long-term members and they've done their best to implant the correct morals and virtues in my life. The community in this church and my parents have fulfilled their duty at baptism however, something that no parent or anyone in a church could do is make you believe in something as abstract and intangible as God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. After a long bout, God finally saw from my heart enough for me to realize that he was God through the love shown to me and a series of miracles.

For some reason I need to travel to Nicaragua and be exposed to one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere before I understood. When I returned, I had a hunger for growth and knowledge and I depth of insight that was insatiable. My freshman year was a year of exponential growth in my faith. Yet to that point, my faith was based entirely upon a mountaintop experience. The following year, I again traveled with the church to the Dominican Republic and was once more granted a faith boost. These mountaintop experiences became the focal point of my faith and when God wasn't providing me with something tangible or something to get excited about, I got frustrated. My faith at this point faltered. I thought I was experiencing a plateau period or a period of stagnant growth when God decided that it was ready to move on from milk to solid food. At this point in time, I had lost my first mentor in faith as his internship with the church had expired.

For the next year, I slowly and then more rapidly fell away from the God I knew, the God who had singled me out for his work. As many parents know, or should know, deception is an easy game to play and I played that card pretty well. It's easy to fool those around us and during the summer of my sophomore year, my good friend's parents were out of town for two straight months. Partying quickly developed into a nightly reoccurrence. Instant gratification is an addictive substance in any form and for me, it was alcohol. I never got caught, it was almost guaranteed to be a good time and it didn't seem to have any harmful effects. I could still play soccer and I could still get good grades. The only person I was really deceiving was myself.

At the start of my junior year, the soccer time was finally supposed to have some success. I seriously injured my groin during the first game of the season. I joined a program at my school. The girl who I had been spending time with all summer decided that she had other plans for Homecoming. The juggling act that I had performed successfully for so long started to fall ball by ball. For the next two months, I watched my soccer team play and due to the rigor of my classes, I was unable to spend much time with some of my closest friends. I had always had at least one crutch, and now they were both gone.

This was part of the plan that God had for me and one day I started crying after practice because it seemed like nothing was going my way. But who was I to question God? And suddenly one of the most amazing people I know was thrown into the mix. After a short time, I realized that he was living the way I should be. He was not just another kid at school. He was a Christian who I saw to be living not just in the world, but of the world. Our bond grew stronger as he served as the perfect template for my faith. For awhile I latched onto the idea of being Nick Lane. But that wasn't me, it was Nick. And I'm Daniel. I needed to develop my own strengths and my own weaknesses. As I started to focus more and more on the changes in my life, God blessed me with another gift: a Young Life club at my school and more importantly, a leader. After Campaigners club, we would go to Starbucks and discuss prevalent issues and how we could apply our faith to them.

Through these talks, I realized that my faith before had been based on mountaintop experiences and whenever I needed a boost, I could convince myself that I was different than everybody else and that I knew who God was and somehow that made me better. Oswald Chambers dramatically changed that view. He says, "If we continue to try to bring back those utmost moments of inspiration, it is not God that we want. We are becoming obsessed with the moments when God did come and speak with us and we are insisting that he do it again. But what God wants us to do is to walk by faith. We must never consider our moments of inspiration as a standard way of life. Our work is our standard."

I think God has given us everything we need to carry out his plan successfully. More and more I understand that it is our conscious decisions that determine how present God is in our lives. I try to rationalize decisions to myself by making them gray, when in reality they are black and white. There is a difference between what I think is innate and what God wants me to do. Those decisions are not as gray as I wish them to be. As Christians, we are no different than anyone else. As my Young Life leader expressed to me, "The only thing different about being a Christian are the eyes with which you see the world." We still have to face everything the world has to offer. Temptations do not get easier just by being a Christian. They get easier when you make the conscious decision to follow God. Thank you.