

Faith Mennonite Church
September 10, 2017
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Getting started: And we're off!

Genesis 1

R: Happy New Year, Joetta!

J: Happy New Year! It feels great to be back after our summer time off and to see how our various commissions have been working hard to launch our new church year. We've always started up our Sunday School program in September, but this fall we're also living into a new church-year calendar, which we adopted at our Annual Meeting back in early February. So we're launching our programmatic year now instead of early February.

R: And we have a theme for the year: Growing together as children of God. It might be helpful to say a bit about how this theme emerged.

J: It wasn't just our idea. The Church Council started work back in May thinking about who we are as a congregation and where we want to be placing our emphasis and energy.

R: Back in the Spring we realized that about one-third of our congregation is made up of our children and youth. We don't want to think of them simply as the "future" of the church, but as an important part of the now! How can we fully support our children and youth AND how can we ALL grow into our calling to be "children" of God?

J: So that's how the theme developed. And the various commissions have been thinking of ways to shape their activities this year around that theme.

R: During the education hour this morning, Joan Kreider, our moderator-elect, will lead all of us into a further discussion of how each of us can be involved.

J: There are two parts of our theme: Growing together / as children of God. I'd like to talk a bit about the first part...the growing together part.

Genesis 1 is a story of a beginning: the beginning of a conscious understanding of our human relationship in and with creation. As an origin story set in a liturgical, poetic format with repeated rhythms and phrases, it provides some useful images of what it means to be alive and to grow. It can help lead us into this year of seeking to grow together.

The process of growth is a creative process. It begins at some point, like the beginning of life. But that point can be *anywhere* in our life's journey. Every moment is potentially a new beginning point. In the creation story the beginning point is in the midst of a chaotic void. Sometimes we know it's time to grow when current patterns and ways of living just aren't working anymore. Our life feels chaotic. Or maybe it just feels empty. Maybe we have a restlessness that won't go away. Any of these things can be an opportunity to invite God's spirit to come breath over our troubled waters and bring forth something new in our lives.

When we're young growth is mostly exciting: we love to measure to see if we've grown another inch. How many families have a place in your house where you kids can chart your growth? We still have marks on one of our door frames. And how exciting is it, kids, when you pass one of your parents in height? And all through school you keep moving, growing, from one grade to the next. You can look back and think about things you've learned this year that you didn't know last year.

Genesis one gives a picture of a Creator who has the same keen delight in growth and in change. Each day is a new movement: something new comes forth. And at each step, God declares that it is good. Two weeks ago when we reviewed our summer series on diversity, Gregg Richardson

commented that sometimes people think of diversity as a bitter pill--something we *have* to do or tolerate. But, he countered, diversity is wonderful: there is so much to be enjoyed in the diversity of language and music and visual art and culture and individual personalities. That is the message of the creation narrative: bringing new things to fruition--growing--is a wonderful thing. “God saw that it was good!”

But yes, growth does ask something of us. According to Genesis 1, God began a project and had to keep going for six successive days to bring that growth to fruition. Growth and creative processes require repetition and even discipline. Melissa and Adam and all of our musicians can’t just sit down and play a new piece: they have to practice, sometimes repeating a few difficult notes over and over again. Whether we condition for athletic events or prepare for musical recitals or a new work certification or take up a new hobby, we have to expend effort. That’s the only way growth can come.

But we can make the effort more fun by doing the growing *together*. The Creator in the Genesis account is not singular but rather a “we.” “Let us make humans in our image.” We believe in a relational God, whom we worship as the Trinity (Parent/Son/Holy Spirit). Our growth multiplies and is enhanced when it is a shared effort. We have a number of opportunities here at FMC, beyond our Sunday morning

worship and education hour, when we can gather with others and encourage one another. If you haven't yet connected with one of these, I encourage you to speak with a deacon or Ry or myself to explore ideas. In the next few weeks we'll be offering the opportunity to sign up to be part of a triad for spiritual support this coming year.

One last thing: God took a rest day at the end of that creative growth spurt! Resting is key to growth and if we don't do it, we only wear ourselves out and we don't achieve or enjoy the gain. So, please, take your nap this afternoon!

R: I'd like to talk a bit about the biblical call for ALL of us to be(come) as children.....

As Children of God

While we were still in the brainstorming stages of developing our theme for the year and the idea of focusing on "children" came up, some people expressed concern that such a theme might be too narrow, that it might risk feeling exclusionary for some people in our congregation. But what we realized in the process of shaping the theme is that, from a biblical and theological perspective, *all* people could be considered children, *children of God*. Of course, part of our desire this year is to be more attentive to and more intentional about how we support faith lives of the kids in our congregation. We want to ask important questions like: What can we do to more fully include and better support the many children of our congregation that we are blessed to have among us? One way that we are looking to address this question is by forming a Youth Faith Formation night for 6th-12th graders on the last Wednesday of the month. We are excited to start that this month. And we are encouraging every commission of the church, and really every person of the congregation, to imagine new ways of deepening connections with our children. But to make a special effort to focus on the kids of our congregation doesn't mean that the so-called "adults" in the room should simply take the year off to play a merely supporting role or something. Part of what we are envisioning for this year is not only that we focus more attention on the kids of our congregation, but more broadly, we want to focus on what it means for us *all* to be *children of God*. (And, really, who are the kids of our congregation anyway? Those under 18? Can't I be a kid? Can't you? I mean, if you want to draw a line in the sand that's okay I guess, but who is going to be the one to tell Dick Westby and Stew Thornley that they aren't kids anymore? – I'm certainly not!). But, seriously, part

of what we are envisioning – and this is the theme that I want to touch on briefly this morning – is that we begin to explore as a congregation the sense in which we are *all* children of God. Whether you are old or young or middle-aged, about to turn 80 or just about to be born, *you* are a child of God.

So, what does it mean for us to affirm that we are *all* “children,” and not simply or merely children, but children *of God*, as our theme this year states? It seems to me that to affirm our identity as children *of God* means that our lives are finally dependent on God’s grace. We are brought into this world by the grace of God, our lives are sustained and borne along by the grace of God, and we receive *new life*, the life of the resurrection, only by the grace of God. But this means that we are not finally *independent* creatures; our lives are intertwined with one another and with the rest of creation, this creation that God calls good. We are not our own creators. Our lives are dependent; our lives are derived, that is to say, our lives are borne along with and by the life-giving, life-sustaining, and life-renewing grace of God.

But if you stop and think about it for a second, that’s not really how we go about living our lives though, right? Especially as “adults.” I mean, we are more comfortable with the idea that *children* are the dependent ones and that to *grow* into so-called “adulthood” is always to *grow up* – we move upward *from* childhood *to* adulthood. And we are accustomed to thinking that to *grow up* in this way means to become increasingly independent – independent from our parents especially, but independent of our neighbors and friends too, which includes the independence to make our own decisions, to live where want to live, to do what we want to do, etc.

And once we have convinced ourselves that we have reached “adulthood,” that is, once we have convinced ourselves that we are no longer dependent like little children, but are now Responsible and Well-Adjusted, Hard-Working and Good Citizens, we almost immediately – and maybe I am just speaking for myself, but I don’t think I am – begin to enter into all kinds of delusionally wishful thinking about ourselves and our life. It goes something like this: after childhood, one goes to college, gets a job, gets married (and *remains* married), has some kids, buys a house, invests some money, gets a promotion, invests some more money—and if one is truly wise, lets it grow and grow upward—because if you don’t allow money to grow and grow you will not have enough for retirement, and if you don’t have enough for retirement, well then, you will become dependent. You will become like a child. The sign of a life well-lived in our culture, that is to say, an *adult* life, is a life that is completely independent of the need for others. One should *never* become dependent on the State, one’s family, one’s friends, or God-forbid, one’s church. And, really, if you think about it, the greatest fear of an adult in our culture is the prospect of losing his/her sense of independence. The greatest fear of an adult in our culture is to become *dependent* again on others, to become like a child. And the one who does not grow enough money for retirement, who cannot secure the future for him or herself, the one who is not so Well-Adjusted, who does not move *upward* and *onward* toward full “maturity” into adulthood, is perceived to be at risk of becoming like a child again in old age. And who would want *that!*? Our culture of adult independence perceives anything less than this as a great moral failure, an embarrassment, a kind of *reversion* even. It’s no wonder that one of the great American mythologies is summed up in the phrase, “pull yourself up by your *own* bootstraps!” I mean, that we hold all people to this standard is what makes America great -- right?

We know that all of this is just mythology. No one really lives this way. I mean, it's really delusional thinking if you think about it, because the truth of the matter is that we *are always* dependent. We are dependent on one another like crazy, even if we would like to constantly hide that truth from ourselves and from each other. And we are quite literally dependent upon the rest of creation; our lives are *unlivable* without fresh air to breathe, without the earth beneath our feet, without the water that runs through our city, without the trees of the forests, without the fruits and vegetables that we eat for sustenance. At bottom, we are dependent creatures, and we are *all* dependent on the grace of God; we are, in other words, *children of God*.

One might say that the myth of "adulthood" is the myth that we are our own creators, that we are completely self-sufficient, that we don't need others, that we are, in short, something like gods. But we are not. We are creatures, we are children, we are dependent. Nowhere is this dependence more clear than in Genesis stories -- the whole of creation is *brought forth* and *sustained* by God's Word. And if God turned God's face away from creation, the whole of it would fall into an abyss. We are radically dependent on grace, and we so often do everything to refuse and deny this reality.

When Jesus calls us to become like little children, perhaps he is saying that our lives which are made possible by grace are not measured by how well-adjusted we are to life in this world, nor by how well we may or may not move toward "maturity" or "wholeness" or "health" according to the metrics of American society, nor on how well we may or may not grow into some ideal called "adulthood" in which we are fully independent from others; instead, perhaps what Jesus is saying is that our lives are not about measurement at all. Our lives are rather gifts of God's grace; and because our lives are gifts of God's grace, discipleship of Jesus requires that we give up on the myth of independence and become like children again, acknowledging our dependence on our Creator and our dependence on others and the creation around us.

To become like a child is scary because it goes against all the myths that we have been taught; it goes against the myth that we can secure our own future. But the good news of the gospel is precisely this: that God *loves* us not because we are self-sufficient gods but precisely in our creatureliness, as dependent children, and that even in our darkest hour God does *not* abandon us; for it is this God who brought us into being, it is this God who promises to sustain us, and it is this God who promises to *always* be *with* us in freedom and in love. The good news of the gospel is not that we should grow up to become Responsible, Well-adjusted and Good Citizens, but simply that *God loves us* as God's children.

In relation to this loving God, we are always children, we are always creatures who are in some fundamental sense, dependent. But this does not mean we are not free. Far from it. As children of God we are *set free* by God's grace to live in a *mutual relation* of love to one another as sisters and brothers. We are *free* as creatures not in order that we may *grow up* out of childhood and enter into the illusion of the self-sufficiency and independence of "adulthood;" rather, we are *set free* as creatures so as to be-free-for-one another. We are *free* only in our mutual boundedness to each other, in our mutual upbuilding of one another as sisters and brothers who are in need of grace and love. The good news of the gospel is that we are *set free* for one another through the power of that Word that brought into being the whole of creation *out of nothing*, through the power of that Word enfleshed in Jesus among us, and through the power of that Word who raised Jesus from the dead. We are set free, as sisters and brothers, to live with and for one

another, in mutual dependence on God's grace, for we are all children of the living God. Thanks be to God!