

**Putting Away Childish Things –
When Your Idea of God Picks Up Steam:
United Church of Gainesville
July 4, 2010
Larry Reimer
with reflections by
Kelsey McNeil, Tim Martin, and Liz Harvey**

First Corinthians 13

If you've ever been to a wedding, you've probably heard this very famous scripture: The thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the church and Corinth. It begins this way.

“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast (or some manuscripts read “to be burned”) but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

This is one of the most remarkable passages in our scripture. Notice that Paul is actually one-upping Jesus. Paul says that even if we can meet Jesus' legendary challenge to have faith enough to move a mountain, it's basically worthless if we don't have love.

This is the passage that overcomes every legalistic division that otherwise made it into the bible – the bad ones against women, slaves and gay people – and even the good ones about giving away all we have or even martyring ourselves. None of that matters if we are mean spirited, narrow minded, self-centered people of the left, middle, or right.

Tonight I want to focus on a different part of this passage, the strange middle of this scripture that even I tend to leave out at weddings or funerals, because it seems like such a digression.

In an abrupt shift, Paul says, “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly. But then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

Paul then seems to remember what he started out to say and concludes the passage, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Back to putting an end to childish ways.

This is the last of our worship services on the “Road Less Traveled”, and we are concluding it by having three of our members share a moment when they moved from a childish faith into a new and different version of God. None of their stories is their final version of God.

All of them realize that their faith journeys will continue. Each of their offerings tonight is like a slide, an image of a chapter in a faithful life.

We begin with Kelsey McNeil who has graduated from UF and will soon be moving to Austin, Texas. She will share the moment in her journey when she decided to be baptized, and we will then celebrate her baptism among us.

After Kelsey, Tim Martin, our new moderator, UF professor, husband of Cindy, and father of four wonderful boys will share his story.

He will be followed by Liz Harvey, a member of our church currently serving on our Congregation and Ministry Review Board. Liz is in the process of retiring from her practice as one of Gainesville's finest counselors. She and her husband John have two adult children, a daughter and a son, the latter of whom was recently ordained as a United Methodist minister.

Kelsey

Baptism Speech: Putting childish faith aside

There are many things that I have always wanted to believe: that ice cream will become a food group, that I will never lose my loved ones, that Batman will always win and that right will be as clear from wrong as night is from day. But just as those sticky summer days slowly slip into night, a burning orange sky becoming both darker and clearer at the same time, so I have slowly learned that for some things, there is no guarantee. Growing up and into a deeper faith has helped expose some of life's faith lessons to me:

- 1) **There is no right answer.** My, how much easier it would be if there was! But the truth is, no one is going to float down or up or over from the heavenly abyss to bestow the truth of afterlife upon us. The only things I can consider 'right' are what feels right to me: the strong, warm glow of the sun on my back; the peaceful, millisecond long silence that follows a prayer; and the feeling I get when I realize what amazing things and people God has placed in my life, people and things that I never would have thought to ask for.
- 2) **When in doubt, keep it simple.** My mind is very good at wandering. Math, not so much. But trailing off into future plans, to do lists and questions it's got down pat. And often, I find myself getting into a tangled web of religious questions. By the time I've gotten myself unstuck, ripping my mind from the web like a fly freed just before the spider's dinner, I am exhausted and full of doubt. So I try to remind myself as often as possible to stick to what I know: I know that God loves me, and you and you. I know that all I can do is try my best. And I know that faith is a journey, not a destination: with each step, God will help me find the answers, or settle for unknowns.

That is why I have come here today, to be baptized. I am ready to show my commitment to the path, to a life with God by my side. And I am ready to accept this new, mature faith. Mature faith is honest and loyal, sticking to the few things you know to be true; it is accepting the unknown while seeking to learn more. And although learning more may mean bursting some of those childhood beliefs, I'm confident that the leap into an adult-shaped faith will be worth it.

Tim

I was lucky to have a religious upbringing in my home and in the Methodist church that did more good than harm. My mother's definition of sin as something we do or don't do that pulls us farther from God or from our fellow travelers is still the gold standard that I use to identify my own failings. A series of caring and open-minded youth ministers and middle and high school Sunday school teachers assured me early on that church was a good and safe place to ask questions and express doubts about God and religion. But it wasn't all great with organized religion for me. I lived in a suburb of Oklahoma City, otherwise known as the "Buckle of the Bible Belt", so I had several opportunities to participate in youth revivals in friends' churches. For those of you unfamiliar with the concept of a youth revival, this involves inviting your friends to church for games, activities, or a cool overnight, which at some point leads to all of you sitting quietly in a room, listening to a youth minister asking you what would happen to your soul if you died tonight. Somehow I ended up missing the revivals that included burning piles of satanic books and records, but they did occur. Fortunately, I was comfortable and confident enough with my concept of God that I knew that conversion under threat of eternal torment in Hell was a pretty lame way to go, but bobbing along in a sea of fundamentalism in the middle of dry, dry Oklahoma didn't do much for my feelings about organized religion in general.

The nail in the coffin of organized religion for me was driven during college and graduate school. I'm a little slow, but around the time I was 16 or 17 it finally dawned on me that my favorite uncle's long-term male "roommates" were sharing more than rent with him. Our five year stint in Seattle, and the deep relationships we developed there with gay and lesbian friends taught me that homosexuals were facing the same civil rights struggles that previous generations of women and African Americans had fought, even while they were trying to live lives that were as normal and mundane and wonderful as Cindy and I were enjoying. I just couldn't square this with the refusal of all the mainstream protestant denominations to fully welcome all people into the life of their churches. Added to this, I was increasingly shaken by the implications that came along with the exclusivity clause inherent in mainline Christian doctrine: how could I ever associate myself with groups of people that believed in and followed creeds that implied that millions of

devout Jews, Hindus and Muslims, not to mention Gandhi and Albert Einstein, were doomed to rot in Hell for eternity. If that was what organized religion was all about, I might as well walk away. And I did.

I know that this story is not unique. I think in its broad arc disillusionment with religion in college is almost a rite of passage. And I was OK with that. I hadn't given up on God; I had just given up on getting together with other people to worship God, because there was just too much baggage and bad stuff that came along with that. Because of my good Methodist upbringing, I was familiar with Jesus' comforting assurance that wherever two or more of us gather in His name, then He will be there. That's powerful stuff, but I didn't see any choice but to set it aside. I resigned myself to being the clichéd "spiritual but not religious" for the rest of my life, because there seemed to be no other alternative.

And it worked out OK until Cindy and I decided to start a family, and I finally relented to her urgings for us to look for a church home for us and for our soon-to-be children. Zach Neece had invited Cindy, through some musician friends, to play at a service. We figured we'd take that opportunity to try UCG, then the Unitarian congregation, and go from there. I remember sitting in this sanctuary and reading the Compact and feeling like I'd just crested the thousandth dune in the desert and suddenly encountered the ocean. The experience reminds me of an article I read about one of those so-called stone age tribes that until recently had not been in contact with modern civilization. This particular tribe subsisted almost entirely on a bland but bitter root that had to be stewed into a flavorless gruel for consumption. The author of the article recounted making a pot of fresh white rice for the tribe, and seeing the tribesmen weep with surprise and joy as they tasted and felt the flavorful rice in their mouths. That is what the experience of finding UCG has been like for me. Not only has it been joyful because the taste and texture is new and surprising, but it has been true grace because I did not even know that these tastes and textures of organized religion existed.

The moments of grace and growth that my family and I have had at UCG would never have occurred if I had stayed in that comfortable "organized religion has no meaning for me" place. When Cindy was in the hospital, pregnant with David and Brian and with a failing liver, Catherine Berg and Zach Neece were in her room when the doctor came in to say it was time for an emergency c-section. Catherine took our hands in hers and prayed with us for health for Cindy and for our fragile little boys. UCG has offered many opportunities for me to grow – to examine my own life and the way I live with those around me, and to seek and find places in this community where I can contribute, and be part of something bigger

and more important than me. Most importantly, UCG has been a community where I can gather with others, and know that God is here with us. So in leaving behind my childish notions of organized religion as nothing but a harmful and dead end enterprise, I have allowed God, acting through UCG, acting through all of you, to change me, and for this I am truly thankful.

PUTTING AWAY CHILDISH THINGS

I want to say that I wrote these thoughts before I read Larry's sermon that started this series and also before I attended David Hackett's seminar last Sunday, which I understand was a repeat from the church retreat this spring. It is comforting to know that my story has many common elements with your stories as we make our faith journeys. But putting away childish things can be a much more anguishing process than it sounds when you read in black and white about those "normal" faith developmental passages.

I remember the night vividly, some months after the death of my mother in 1985, when I awoke in the middle of the night in tears, wishing I could go back to not knowing what I now knew, but knowing I could not. I had to forge ahead, to whatever it was that was calling me., but I felt lost and alone, and was in a state of total confusion, a true midlife crisis, borne out of that major loss of my mother. Gone was my model of womanhood, the model I had patterned myself after without thought for 37 years.

Many variables were intersecting my life's trajectory at that time. The first female clergy joined the ministerial staff at my church and subtly but dramatically began modeling for me new ways of thinking about myself as a woman, new ways of thinking about God as spirit and not a being with X or Y chromosomes. A retreat speaker further jolted my thinking by beginning her first talk with the question, "Who tells you who you are?" I immediately began my mental list of all those people who defined me – my parents, my husband, my children, my siblings, society, etc. And then the speaker made it clear that if anyone other than God was telling me who I was, that I was clearly a ship tossed about in the waves. I was not self-defined, I was other-defined. Who was I, if not the woman I'd always thought myself to be? I began graduate school in that state of mind.

My belief systems on every front were being challenged. It felt as though every arena of my life was up for grabs. I felt a huge chasm between my husband and me as he struggled to understand what had happened to me and I had no words to explain it. These passages don't just affect us – they affect all those with whom we are intimately entwined. My

children were no longer the central focus of my life – for one of them that was a good thing and the other felt somewhat abandoned by me. My father could only offer religious platitudes. My Christian friends, out of their perplexity and helplessness with my state of mind, just laid hands on me and prayed for me. My only anchor was my relationship with God – whoever that was and whatever form God took.

I began an intense search to understand where I was and what was happening to me. I can honestly say I had never really learned to think for myself, that I had simply adopted the beliefs of my parents, my church, people in authority. I was experiencing an identity crisis.

I read books about the midlife passage – and boy did that all resonate. Though I had felt prepared for and accepting of my mother's death, it was such a dramatic ending in my life that had created fertile ground for a new beginning, not really of my conscious choosing, but as an evolutionary process in my development as a person.

I read books about Biblical feminism and I was startled and even angered to discover that organized religion had really distorted the message Jesus brought. That led me to The Christian Agnostic by Leslie Weatherhead – and here was someone who was putting into words all the doubt and confusion that was raging in me. And then I was introduced to Joseph Campbell's The Power of Myth and I was absolutely blown away. Christianity was not the only truth! Then I uncovered James Fowler's model of faith development and there it was in black and white! I was not weird – it was a normal and necessary process if I was going to continue to be committed to my spiritual development.

I began a long process of sorting through all the beliefs I had lived by, thinking through and discarding things that simply didn't make sense, and clearly no longer fit. How we language about our faith really became important to me. That led me to Marcus Borg and Jon Dominic Crossan and Elaine Pagels works, all of which made so much sense to me that I could at long last feel like I was arriving at truth that I could fully embrace life with. I struggled with why those truths were being withheld in mainline denominations. What had these clergy learned in their seminaries anyway???

My church, so full of language and "holy noise" that now became noisy gongs and clanging cymbals to my ears, felt like an internal battleground and no longer a place where I could worship or experience any transcendent state of being. I could not breathe. I no longer fit. That part of my past had to be put away if I was going to continue to grow. There was no going back.

And so I spent a year visiting any spiritual community in the area that I thought might possibly be a good fit for me. And that was a wonderful experience. I highly recommend it!! I learned so much about different faiths, their beliefs and practices, and talked to so many people about their faith journeys. It was one of the most important decisions in my life and I had to be certain it was the right one before I made that change. I ended that search here at UCG 10 years ago. I had actually started it here, but had to go full circle just to make sure.

Putting away childish things for me was one of the most painful wrenching away experiences I've ever had but it was also the most liberating and life-giving thing I have ever done. I know I have not "arrived" but I hope further transformations aren't quite so tumultuous – and at least I now know there is a map of the territory and I have you fellow sojourners with me on this road less travelled.

Thanks Kelsey, Tim, and Liz for sharing these gifts of your lives. I was struck last Sunday when Jeremy Taylor, in his work with Sandy's dream, reminded us that our individual dreams and visions also have a collective component. If nations and the world are going to change, this change will happen because individuals experience new visions and speak of them. We grow as a collectively by uncovering the same aha's of awareness that we have individually.

Think of each of the stories just shared as they would apply to us as a nation.

Think of our nation realizing, like Kelsey, that blessing comes not in having all the answers, but rather in living the questions and trusting that in continued searching we truly find meaning. Think of how hundreds and then thousands and then millions of us realizing this may transform our nation into a land that does not need to be certain and right but rather open and learning.

Think of the unfolding chapters in our nation's life when like Tim we recognize the beauty of people we love who love those of the same gender, when like Tim we recognize the integrity of the belief systems outside our religious traditions. Imagine our whole nation tasting in other culture's truths something like a precious food we had never known of before.

Think of the chapters in our nation's life when like Liz, our whole country could question who we have been in order to discover new wisdom. Imagine whole communities of people and faith letting go of a childhood God so that a God beyond the God of traditional religion could appear to us. Imagine our whole nation welcoming universal myths and affirming the journey of other faiths.

One of the ways change comes to nations is by individuals realizing, one by one, that it is time to give up childish ways to see more clearly. When enough of us discover new wisdom and begin living a new

chapter of love, our nation turns the page on its book of love, and together we live a new chapter together as a nation transformed.

So let us remember that nations like individuals are called to grow by putting away childish things. Let us celebrate and remember the times that America had such moments when liberty and justice for all overtook oppression and division for some.

And let us pray that we as a nation may continue to put away childish ways to learn a wiser love that opens our arms to embrace a wider diversity of people, to change our lives to be more gentle with our earth, and to lay down our weapons to stop the senseless killings of murder and war. Let us know that this is the less traveled road that forever calls us and will not stop, for after all is said and done, it is love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. It is this calling of love will never end.

Prayer:

O God of summer's graces: of sweat lodge heat, of renewing showers, of ozone flavored lightning, of restorative pools, springs, lakes and oceans; and of the childhood taste of ice cream,

We pray with a summer's wonder beyond the old needs for clear cut answers to a softer openness to something new being born within us.

We pray for the new doorway at which we stand.

We pray for the new lesson about to be learned.

We pray for the new person about to come to our lives,

And in this all we pray that together, we may learn to love and in so doing may our land be blessed. May our land bless the world with peace and be even more beautiful.