

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for October 23, 2011  
Lessons: Deuteronomy 6:20-25 and II Corinthians 5:14-21; 6:1-2

## WHEN YOUR CHILD ASKS YOU

In our adult forum last Sunday, we talked about experiences that become *formative*. They shape not only our thinking but our emotional responses to life and other people. They color the way we see the world around us and the way we see ourselves in that world. For better and for worse, formative experiences shape us and set our course through life. They do, indeed, *form* our attitudes, values, and even our feelings, molding us into the future adults we will become. Whether a child is fearful or confident is determined partly by genetics and the child's own personality but also by that child's early experiences. Before we understand what is happening to us, we are being *formed* by life. The question is, "Can we later be *transformed*?" Can what life has done to us be changed so that we ourselves are changed and become like new people? Paul says, *Yes, we and our lives can be transformed*. For us, there can be change so complete and so good it amounts to a new creation.

Children are entrusted to us to love, care for, and teach, and we do the teaching not only by telling but also by showing, sharing, and listening. Neglect or outright abuse form a child's understanding of self and others but make it deformed. For that child, life hurts. What is supposed to be love and may even be mislabeled as love hurts. To live is to be left alone or else brutalized. Depending upon the child's disposition and other factors, he or she may withdraw from life's pain, or may accept personal responsibility for it and so blame himself or herself ("I'm a bad child"), or may avoid the pain by losing self in some escape (which can lead to addiction), or may become belligerent toward others and hurt them.

Experiences can also be formative for families, neighborhoods, communities, tribes, and nations. Poverty is formative, but so is affluence. Slavery was so powerfully formative for the Hebrews trapped in Egypt that even after they had been set free, they continued to think, speak, and react to life's needs and distresses as though they were still slaves. That's not surprising. It takes time for a child who has not experienced responsible love to trust such love when it is finally offered. The older orphan may continue for years after adoption to think like an orphan. The orphan experiences were formative, and so the new experiences of adoption and belonging must be transformative. We're talking about a very big change in someone's life and not merely in the child's living arrangements. For such a person to be changed effectively, long-practiced reactions must be rewritten at the emotional level.

The emancipation of America's slaves was not so transformative as it should have been, because their situation itself did not change so much as the word "emancipation" implies. Freedom requires resources and the latitude to use them. The biblical concept of salvation suggests being released from a tight space of confinement into a much more open space with freedom of movement. America's slaves were released from the detention of being held as legally owned property, but their economic and social confinement remained unchanged and, in terms of hatred and violence against them, actually grew worse. Contempt intensified as literal slavery was replaced with systemic repression, and the life experiences of people did not change but now had blame added as though they themselves were responsible for their conditions but without the freedom and power to overcome their confinement in a repressed life.

Deuteronomy looks back to the time of liberation to gain a fresh start and inspire the people to readjust their attitudes and go forward with better, more faithful reactions on a truer path in life. Somewhere along the line, the people of Israel had lost the perspective of former slaves set free and adopted by a loving God.

The child who has been abused and bullied does not automatically become compassionate and respectful of others, but neither does that child have to become an abuser and a bully in turn. What is needed, however, to save the child from either bullying others or bullying self for the rest of life is transformative experience, and I'm not speaking of just one event that supposedly changes everything – like a conversion experience. I'm talking about the slower change and steadier movement out of the old ways of thinking and living and into the new. Salvation is never just once and done, except in the sense that adoption is once and done. As soon as the judge signs the legal papers, the adoption is accomplished, or is it? Considerable time, love, and patience will be needed for the child to catch up emotionally and mentally with the legally changed situation. So, yes, our salvation was accomplished when Jesus died for us and God raised him to newness of life that includes us as his sisters and brothers, but for us to catch up with our new situation in life as God's daughters and sons, we need to do more than confess that we believe. Someone may ask the newly adopted child, "Whose daughter (or son) are you?" and the child may answer with the names of the adoptive parents, but internalizing the truth of that answer so that it transforms the way that child thinks of self and others and responds to life's experiences will take time and sustained effort. Change is hard work. Transformative change is very hard work, with many setbacks and much confusion to be expected, not as failures, but as necessary parts of the process.

Here, I believe, is where Christianity has often failed in representing the gospel, the good news, of Jesus the Christ. We have told people *what to believe*, and then we have told them that believing it makes all the difference and solves all their worst and deadliest

problems. Well, yes, adoption does solve the orphan's most basic problem – that of having no parents and no family – just as release from bondage does solve the most basic problem of slaves, but much more is required for the new to be internalized by the person who has been rescued from the old. Consent to beliefs is not faith, because at its core, faith is trust; it is the entrusting of life and self to the One who loves us.

There is also a modern and postmodern problem that needs to be recognized but without scorn. For thousands of years, children grew up to accept the way of life they inherited as members of a family and community. The ways of the tribe became the child's ways and were carried forward and developed into adulthood. There was no adolescence as we now know it – the time of rebellion when to grow up the person rejects much that was life's context in childhood to stand on his or her own as a unique and independent self. The philosophical idea of doubting everything in order to find the core of truth has been trivialized into adolescent rebellion. I have to test it for myself. I must decide for myself what to believe, and there is considerable shame among my peers in believing anything my parents believed and tried to teach me, especially if it comes under the heading of religion. So, it is now in style to fabricate one's own religion from bits and pieces of other faiths, philosophies, and even mere platitudes or lines from pop songs. I say all of this without blaming because we, meaning Christianity, tried to suppress the questions by repeating the old answers more and more defensively, shutting out the modern world and condemning its changes in perspective as false and wicked. By hardening its beliefs against questions and against adaptation to present life, Christianity inflamed the rebellion of its own children. But even so, it remains fashionable to reject the beliefs of one's parents, community, culture, and religion in order to become what passes for grown up and independent. While some people truly struggle with life's questions and faith's affirmations of hope and meaning, others just follow along by simply dismissing faith without much thought because doing so is in style.

Israel's liberation by a loving God was supposed to be so transformative that it gave new and positive meaning to the people's having been slaves. No, there is no justification for enslaving anyone, but the painful and degrading experience of enslavement can be turned into a passion for justice, freedom, and respect for all people. Or it can be hardened into bitterness that turns the tables by enslaving or exploiting someone else.

So, as a Christian, am I forgiven? If so, I am free to become forgiving, but I am not free to become judgmental. Am I healed? If so, must I not change the way I look upon my own former brokenness and the brokenness of others not yet healed? Have I been understood and accepted with respect and love? If so, I am liberated from alienation to become understanding, accepting, respectful, and kind toward others.

Change comes hard for all of us, and we are programmed to resist it and to revert at every opportunity to our old ways of thinking and responding to life, but with the unseen help of God's Spirit and the seen and felt support of the community of faith, we can rewrite the program. We do not have to remain slaves to our formative experiences in life and our much practiced reactions to people and situations. What was formed in us from our early childhood can be transformed. It doesn't happen easily or overnight, but it can happen. We are not stuck in a rut permanently unless we insist upon being stuck there. But transformative change requires much more than an emotional conversion experience and an approved set of beliefs. Paul tells us to "work out our own salvation," and it must be worked out in relatedness to other people and the human community, because God created human life to be relational. The idea that I can develop my own beliefs in isolation from other people and shared responsibilities for justice and freedom in the world is an adolescent delusion. There is no "me" without the "you" of others. We are in this thing called life together, but for us now, "together" means Jesus Christ is in it with us, too. Amen.