

**J.D. Ousley**  
**Sermon—17Jun18**  
**Mark 4/Fathers' Day**  
**“Faith Full”**

*In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.*

My wife is an occupational therapist. She specializes in treating babies who happen to be born prematurely.

Dana works in a neonatal intensive care unit or NICU at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan; she is a consultant who advises the nurses about what is termed “developmental care.”

My wife watches to see that the premature infants develop as they would have, had they remained longer in their mothers' wombs. For example, she makes sure the nurses keep positioning the babies in their cribs so that all their muscles have a chance to develop. The goal is for the infants to mature so that by the time they reach the age of normal newborns, they will be ready to leave the hospital.

The Gospel lesson for this service is also about *growth*. In the text, Jesus says, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”

At the time of Jesus, people lacked the scientific understanding we have today of plant growth. People back then didn't “know how” a seed germinates. Today, of course, we have learned much more about the growth process.

But Jesus didn't tell this parable to give his disciples instructions about farming! Rather, he wanted to reveal to them an important truth about themselves.

After all, even though we know a lot about agriculture, we are just as hungry as our ancestors were for knowledge of our souls. For us, just as for the disciples of Jesus, the *growth of faith* remains puzzling.

We don't “know how” the seed of faith is sown in our souls. We can't understand how that belief grows within us so that we are able to live as children of God.

If we did know this—if we knew how a person becomes a Christian--then we could help anyone to become a Christian! People could be shown a failsafe formula for coming to have faith, and evangelists would be successful in attracting people to the Church, and the world would be filled with devout Christians!

Alas, faith is not so easy to learn. As St. Paul said, “Behold, I show you a mystery!”

As a result, the growth of faith is also a mystery. There's no cheap formula for it. There's no quick fix for those who lack it.

At Incarnation recently, we have had several *baptisms of adults*.

Such christenings used to be rare. But now that many children aren't brought up in the church, they are not baptized as infants, and so, later christenings have become more common.

But adult baptisms require a preparation that the baptism of infants doesn't require. Since infants can't make their vows for themselves, they don't need any instruction in what the vows mean--and they aren't required to live a Christian life right away!

Adults, on the other hand, need to start living up to their vows as soon as they leave the church. As a consequence, they will want to pay attention to the state of their souls.

Fortunately, they don't need to do this alone. There are some Christians who have a role in the church analogous to my wife's role in the NICU; they are *spiritual* “development specialists.”

These men and women are experts in discerning where a new Christian could best serve God. They can detect all kinds of talents. They are able to help those seeking baptism and others as they try to answer the questions of faith.

For example, these spiritual guides can offer responses to ultimate questions like: What can we expect when we die? What is life in Heaven like? How do we prepare for our own deaths?

Such questions are not to be feared. In fact, it is in struggling with such questions that our faith grows.

And spiritual guides share their wisdom not only in person but through books. For example, we might read writings by contemporary philosophers of religion who defend Christianity.

These thinkers argue that there is a divine Spirit beyond the physical world. This unseen God is able to enrich our lives by answering our prayers.

One of my own mentors in the faith has been a professor I had when I did graduate work in the Philosophy of Religion at the University of London; his name is Keith Ward and he has given lectures and preached here at Incarnation several times over the years. His books and our conversations have answered many questions that I've had about the Christian faith.

I remember one time when we were taking a long walk through the countryside near Oxford, and I asked Keith how God could possibly attend to all the prayers of everyone on earth who asked him for help.

Professor Ward replied that we need to remember that God by definition is *infinite*. And an infinite being can attend to an infinite number of matters—including all the prayers of all the people on earth. Indeed, an infinite God could respond to all the prayers of all the conscious beings *in the universe!*

But faith development isn't only a matter for experts. In fact, we can do a lot to help ourselves on our religious journeys.

We can resolve, for instance, to feed our souls by reading and prayer. We can plant seeds within ourselves that will help us to grow in faith.

Seeds of faith are planted, for instance, when a person drops in to a church, and lights a candle, and offers a prayer for a loved one. This happens frequently at Incarnation. I've known people whose first contact with our parish was lighting a candle. Having planted that seed of faith, these folks ended up becoming members of our congregation.

Whatever we do, *progress* in faith is essential. As the saying goes, "Not to advance in the spiritual life is to fall back."

And, speaking of progress in faith on this Father's Day, we might recall the old expression, "faith of our fathers." In this phrase, we mean of course to include both fathers and mothers.

Now the phrase, "faith of our fathers" and the spirited hymn about that faith that we will sing at the end of today's service both suggest a robust conviction that we want to pass on.

Isn't it a nice thought that religion is not just a private matter that we try to acquire for ourselves to keep us calm and content? The faith of our fathers and mothers is a heritage that we will want to pass on to future generations.

Our religion doesn't only provide answers to our questions and solutions to our problems. Our faith offers us a way to the divine Reality in which we live and move and have our being.

And if we sometimes feel spiritually stuck? Not to worry. God can work with any material! However we feel, whatever we do, God reaches out to us to enrich our lives and uplift our souls.

Count on it: seeds planted by God will grow!

*And now unto God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit be ascribed as is most justly due all might, majesty, power, dominion, and praise, now and forever. Amen.*