

Sermonette - TUMC, June 20, 2021 - Christian Education Recognition Day
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My heart is always full after hearing children and young people talk about their lives, especially at milestone moments like graduation from high school. I know that those of you who have taught, mentored, and pastored our kids will be filled with pride and affection as you think about the growth you've seen in your young charges. As we reflect on the work of guiding children into the world of the adult, we do so in gratitude for the integrity and goodness we already see in our children and young people.

The pathway from birth to adulthood is such a complex journey, we can't possibly unwrap it all here. There is a general pattern of certain neurophysiological stages of development that holds true; but with enough exceptions and unanswered questions that even our most knowledgeable neuroscientists speak humbly on the topic. Even less do we know how these stages of growth in mind and body relate to our developing spiritual understanding. Pieter Niemeyer gave us some wonderful ideas about that in his sermon on March 9.

But I want to focus our attention on how amazing it is just grow into being human. We are dust-creatures, but are also just a tad lower than the angels of God. We weren't at first: we didn't always know what God knows - the difference between good and evil. But as our hominid ancestors evolved into the giant brain-boxes we are now, we became creatures who ponder their purpose and wonder about worlds beyond the one in front of our eyes.

We don't know for sure that no other creatures do this, but it doesn't seem like they do. Humans' brains are huge, deeply folded, and have several times more neurones and neuronic connections than any of the other great apes. We have been making abstract art, speaking in complex languages, and thinking about God and life beyond this life for at least a hundred thousand years. What an astonishing mind you each have! Each one of you, from the newest of babies to our high school grads and our most senior members: each of you is an astonishing thinker. Indeed, thinking is the only reason our ancestors didn't all end up as cat-food on the African savannah.

Moments ago I used the phrase, "grow into being human." Unlike all the other mammals, our babies are born entirely helpless and they remain dependent for a much greater portion of their lives than do baby antelopes, giraffes, or chimpanzees. Honestly, a new baby is of no use at all . . . except for all the thinking. Long-time director of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Michael Tomasello, has famously observed, "Fish are born expecting water, and humans are born expecting culture." That is, we are born expecting to be taught how to be human.

It turns out, having such utterly helpless babies draws the rest of us together to teach the newest humans all that we have learned, and how to learn things no one has learned before. Learning from others, sharing that learning, and then improving on that learning with our own creative ideas is how we have become the earth's great creators of new things and new ways of being, both for good and evil.

So children need and expect teaching from us who have been where they are now. But, not just any kind of teaching will do. There is a significant danger that we can teach young people to be too committed to the knowledge we give them, so that they fail to improve on it and create their own, better culture.

The Proverb we heard this morning makes this point. Scholars note that the phrase that is usually translated from Hebrew as “in the way they should go” literally means “from the mouth.” Some have said that’s just a Hebrew idiom of the time that means “from the start.” But more scholars say there is a focus here on how and what one feeds the children - that the raising up needs to be the right kinds of though food at the right times of life.

That’s the part that is hard to get right - the timing. Even with somewhat predictable developmental stages, how individuals will experience and react to those larger mind and body growth moments can be unpredictable. Responding helpfully to our kids demands all the flexibility, energy, and patience we’ve got. Yes, it can be maddening and exhausting.

We should all learn a bit more about how our minds and bodies grow and change throughout our life times. And we should reflect on our stages of soul growth as well. But almost none of us are going to become neuroscientists: So adults, just ask the kids you care for what you want to know about their lives. If we have been truthful with them, they will probably be honest with us. And kids, we older people aren’t asking about you to find fault; whatever dumb thing you’ve done, I’ve done something dumber. We’re just asking because we want to know the best way to cheer you on.

Now, the closer children get to adulthood, the more they must start the stages of separation so they can become competent adults, ie. people who’ve shifted from being served, to serving others. That’s why God puts a big dump of testosterone on the amygdalas of sixteen year olds: they need courage to start breaking free. The better job you parents do of negotiating a sane release, the more likely it is that, somewhere between 23 and 26, they’ll rediscover what cool people you are and want to hang out with you again.

Whoever cares for kids, they need a LOT of teaching. Without it, they won’t even know how to be just a basic human being, let alone a decent or exceptional one. But along the way, as you train the child’s upper cortex, remember to take advantage of that highly active lower brain - that limbic system that is always checking if things are safe. Remember, all of us are feeling creatures who think. So feed kids the right feelings.

Our kids may not remember all the details of what we’ve tried to teach them, but I absolutely guarantee they WILL remember how you made them feel when they were with you. Make them feel loved, competent, and courageous. Convince them that they can do what has to be done, that they can become confident about themselves in this world. But don’t be disingenuous with them or try to paste false praise on them; they can smell B.S. coming for miles. YOU must believe that each child and emerging adult you care for has at least one area of giftedness and that they can become confident, caring adults. It shouldn’t be hard to believe that because it’s already an irrefutable fact. You just have to write in on your forehead and on your doorposts and lintels, and on your minds and hearts, so that when you place your confidence in our kids, they will know for sure you really believe in them. That can be the beginning, at least, of the opening of the door of faith.