

Sunday May 30th, 2021

PRAYER: We praise you, God of all being! You give food to the hungry, set prisoners free, open the eyes of the blind, and lift the spirits of those bowed down. Because you are righteous, you sent Christ to redeem the lost and the wayward. We come into your presence enlivened by your Holy Spirit and full of new hope to give you the honour due your glorious name. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Great are your words, O God; you make our hearts glad. Wherever we look we see your goodness. Throughout history you have restored the fortunes of your chosen people. In barren lands you led them to living waters. When they were hungry, you sent manna to sustain them. Those who went forth weeping returned home with shouts of joy, recounting the benefits of your wondrous love.

We give thanks for Christ, in whose name we inherit your mercy, and confess anew our faith in him as our high priest. He bore our weaknesses in his body, and thereby made us strong. We give thanks that he lives among us today to encourage the fainthearted, empower the weak, comfort the lonely, and bring release to the captives. Through him we are able to serve above and beyond our collective abilities, and for that legacy we give you thanks.

We give thanks for your Holy Spirit, who renews our flagging spirits and sends us forth with praise on our lips. In the midst of doubt, your Spirit brings clarity; when we are weary, your Spirit revives us. We can rely on your Spirit during lonely adventures; throughout our wanderings, we are never without your presence.

Our hearts beat with joy, thanks to your graciousness. Our eyes see more clearly, thanks to the vision of Christ our Savior. Our whole selves move freely, thanks to your indwelling Spirit. We shout glad alleluias, so great are your works.

BENEDICTION: Let us go and make our contribution to God, to this world and all who dwell therein. Let us not scramble to sit in the most honourable places or rush to recite the longest prayers. But let us, in our giving, offer up all the living we have. Amen.

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Acts 12:6-17

Series: People We All Need in Our Lives

Sermon: "We All Need a Rhoda

One Sunday, in the primary Sunday school class, the children having completed their lesson were busy either playing with toys or colouring pictures. One young boy, at the very end of the table, was feverously colouring away with a box of crayons. As the teacher watched the boy, he switched colours often and with great speed, not being distracted by any of the other children noisily interacting around him.

Curiosity got the best of the teacher, and she crept up slowly to see what he was drawing. The picture was clearly that of a man's head, and the teacher assumed he was creating a picture from the biblical story they had that day on Moses. The teacher asked him gently, "May I ask what you are drawing?" The young boy without lifting his head said, "I am drawing a picture of God." The teacher replied, "But no one knows what God looks like". To which he replied, "They will when I am finished the picture."

I am sure that the teacher got a chuckle from the child's answer. Perhaps, she would have responded as we might thinking, that the naivety of the little boy was charming. As Art Linklater used to say, "Kids say the darndest things." As charming as we think events like the picture in the Sunday school room are, eventually we do come to the point where we admit that he or she is just a child. Soon, we think and even hope, they will grow up and think differently, more logically, and more practically.

How many times did your mother or father yell at you "when will you grow up"? Today we confront our need to have a Rhoda in our lives, because frankly, we are confusing childlikeness with childishness, and it's ruining us. But first let's meet Rhoda from the book of Acts. Rhoda was a servant girl, or in the Greek language a *paidiske*, which means little girl or maiden. Her name was a shortened version of the name "Rosebud".

Rhoda was a servant girl in the household of Mary the mother of John Mark. Many scholars believe that it was this house where the last supper was actually held, and it was also the headquarters for the early Jerusalem church. Specifically, Rhoda's main duty was to be the doorkeeper, and if this was the site of the first church, she would have been busy at her task as people came and went. It would appear that Mary's house was a typical Jerusalem design of that time, with the main house being fronted by a walled courtyard that had a gate or door in it.

Rhoda, being a member of the household, would have been fully instructed in the Christian faith; attending services and prayer gatherings. It would appear that although a young girl, she had a pretty dynamic faith. On the night in question, Peter was imprisoned, by Herod. James had already been executed by Herod, and the church feared Peter was next. Luke tells us that during the night, an angel of the Lord came, and escorted Peter out of jail and onto the street.

Peter, himself wasn't sure if this experience was real, but once he reached the street, and the angel left him, he realized what God had done for him. Not knowing what else to do, Peter heads to one place he knows for sanctuary; Mary's house.

Meanwhile, the church was doing what we might do as a fellowship when faced with a crisis like Peter's imprisonment. The believers had gathered at Mary's, and were praying in earnest for Peter's safety. Suddenly, there is a knock at the door, and Rhoda dutifully goes to see who it is. Being safety conscious, Rhoda asks who it is and Peter identifies himself to Rhoda. Now what happens next is very childlike.

So full of excitement, Rhoda runs back into the prayer meeting, without letting Peter in. Overcome with joy, she can hardly get the words out that Peter is at the door. The believers, who had just been praying for a miracle, mock Rhoda. The only explanation they can come up with to explain what Rhoda had heard is that it must be Peter's angel or in other words, Peter is dead. Finally, after much persistence by Rhoda, the doubtful church goes to open the door, and behold they see Peter standing there.

Luke wants us to see something vital here. It was Rhoda, a child, who believed. It was a child who pointed out to the gathered adults that their prayers had been answered. Now here is something you've undoubtedly heard many times before, but perhaps have never reflected fully on. Why, does Jesus in the gospels, affirm at least a few times, that children come first in the Kingdom of God? Why when Jesus wants to demonstrate what discipleship is like, he picks up a child and plops him on his knee?

Why a child? Why not a biblical scholar or devout monk? We might be inclined to say it is because children are innocent, trusting, and maybe more truthful. Are you kidding? Study your history, and examine your theology, and even explore your own childhood; and you soon see that childhood is anything but the sentimental whitewash we try to paint it with. Before the 1800s in the Victorian age, there was no protection of any kind for children. Did you realize that?

In the United States there was a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals before there was one for children. People cared more about abused horses than abused children. Even today in some countries, children are exploited. Girls are married off at nine years of age. Children work in unsafe sweatshops or chemically laden mining operations, or forcibly trained to be child soldiers, and used as prostitutes.

There is a very ugly trend in some parts of the world. It is called sex tourism. It is to: Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Thailand, and other places where men, including many from Canada, travel to sexually abuse and exploit children. Arrests are rare in these countries because the pimps pay off the police. Up until the Victorian age did you know it was quite legal to publicly execute a child?

In Jesus' day, children were of no account at all. They enjoyed a lower status than women, and that wasn't a very high status to begin with. Some Rabbis said, "It was better to burn a Torah than give it to a woman." The "little ones" were insignificant, degraded, neglected, despised, and it was much worse for girls than boys. Still is in many countries today. Remember our focus on the CBM program "She Matters" a few years back.

Jesus' whole message and approach to the Good News, was that the last shall be first, the meek shall inherit the earth, and the little ones shall be great in the Kingdom of God.

How short sighted we are. We dare not leave the children behind. Notice I said children and not childish ways. Childish and childlike are vastly different, and far too often we confuse the two, to our detriment. Leonard Sweet retells an incident that as a Pastor I have encountered as well.

He points out that when J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter books came out, many Christian parents took to banning the books in their homes. I know of one person who banned these books in her home, but thinks nothing of her sons playing a violent video game like Call of Duty. When Sweet was at a conference of Christian school principals, he referenced in one of his talks the book series. In the break after the session, a group of very angry educators cornered him and said, "Dr. Sweet, don't you know such stories lead children astray and glorify evil?"

"But these are just stories", he said "They are modern day versions of Brothers Grimm, Aesop's fables, Mother Goose, Hans Christian Andersen or Lewis Carol." They replied, "There is no such thing as 'just stories', (Sweet points out that they are right about that). Harry Potter stories are not innocent, but insidious stories" they continued. They're full of magic, and witchcraft, and spells, and all sorts of evil."

Sweet replied, "And Brothers Grimm aren't?" "And besides, our children know that these stories are made up, not true real-life stories." "But they can't tell the difference" They replied. Sweet says he didn't say it out loud but he thought, "Wait a minute. Who is it who cannot tell the difference?" (11 Indispensable Relationships, p. 164)

Three times Jesus ties spirituality maturity to our relationships with children. In Matthew 19 he says, "Let the little children come to me, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven". This particular passage comes immediately after Jesus defends himself on being single and childless. I have never pointed out perhaps, about how odd Jesus' lack of a wife and children would seem to other Jews. Men without a family were suspect in that culture.

A father was expected, when a boy hit 12 years of age (his bar mitzvah) and before he was 22 to have made a marriage arrangement for his son. So, for an older, single, childless man to use a child as a symbol for entering the kingdom of God has a double oddness to it for his listeners. The second time, and maybe the most famous one, occurs at a time when the disciples were fighting with each other over who was the greatest.

A disgusted Jesus picked up a child, placed it on his knee and said, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3) If you are too old to hold a child in your arms or in your heart, you're already spiritually dead. Be careful how you treat the "little ones". The special status of children is reinforced in the third example in the harshest warning Jesus ever uttered.

If you harm a child, or make a child stumble, "It would be better if you had a great millstone strung around your neck and you were drowned in the depths of the sea." (Matthew 18:1-6) I think you get the point. We need Rhoda's in our lives to get us to encounter the joy and life affirming nature of play. To see the joy in the simple things of life. To value and encourage imagination. To help us day dream. God works in our occupations as much as in our recreation, and playtime.

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It is to our detriment to ever believe that a vacation, a day off, an evening spent in a fictional book, playing games with family or friends is ever a waste of time. Sometimes it may be the most important thing we can do in a given moment. Now this next thing that Rhodas do for us may be controversial, but I think Leonard Sweet is on to something vital here. Rhoda's keep us scared.

Every time we go through the Halloween season, and we wonder sometimes why we have this focus on ghosts and witches etc. Why did the Brothers Grimm have such frightening elements in their stories? Actually, most versions we have today of Grimm's stories, are quite tame compared to the originals. In the original Cinderella, the one ugly step sister actually cuts off the end of her foot to try and get into the glass slipper. Didn't know that did you?

These stories, both ancient and modern that cause us goosebumps, have a positive purpose. They help children master their fears. Over time, children realize there are no monsters under the bed, but they will realize there are monsters in every city and town. You cannot encourage someone to be a hero without a villain. There is no Superman without Lex Luther, of Batman without the Joker. There is no joy or happiness without contrast of darkness.

Rhodas also keep us small. Watch a child as he or she takes considerable time to examine something small. Jesus was always using simple things to teach significant lessons. He took mustard seeds and compared it to the power of faith. He took bread and wine and infused it with powerful meaning. In becoming human, Jesus literally became small. We are so blind to the marvel and beauty of this world, but a child is not.

Rhodas also live large by investing in the littleness of life. A child takes an empty box and suddenly they are on a rocket ship blasting out into the cosmos. Only a child could ever think they could capture the essence of God with a box of crayons and paper, and who knows, maybe he did catch a piece of what God is like. If you are not sure of the power of small things then you have never encountered a mosquito.

Rhodas also find it easy to "Ask, seek and Knock" as Jesus called us to do. Sometimes a child can ask the most profound questions with such few words. Children ask questions like "Who am I? Why am I? What am I?" Remember your three-year-old learning the wonder and power of the question "why". "Why daddy?" I heard often. I admit my inadequacy of replying, "Just because". Often Rhodas ask the same questions we want to ask, but are afraid to, lest we seem less pious, less faithful.

Rhodas also keep us light. Gravity is essential, but it is also a curse to us adults. Over time gravity takes its toll on our bodies. We sag, we wear out, but did you know that our souls can succumb to gravity as well. General Douglas MacArthur said, "You don't get old from living a particular number of years; you get old because you have deserted your ideals. Years wrinkle your skin; renouncing your ideals wrinkles your soul. Worry, doubt, fear, and despair are the enemies which slowly bring us down to the ground and turn us to dust before we die."

Rhodas call us back to enjoy novelty, adventure and surprise. Without a Rhoda you might say, "I'm having a senior's moment. Please excuse me."

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With a Rhoda in your life you might say, “I’m having a God moment. Please join me.” Did you know that the word “animation” from which we describe cartoon like shows and movies comes from the word “anima” which means alive? In the world of a child, everything is alive. Jerry Griswold observes how in children’s stories “all God’s creatures seem chatty-whether they be bears, birds, cats, elephants, bugs, lions, pigs, dogs, monkeys, or fish in the sea.”

The world of magic is the world of a child. Children live in a different time zone than we do. We tend to think of the past and future but children live in the now. Nothing upsets a child than being told “not now”. To a Rhoda, life is too valuable, too dynamic, and too incredible to wait until later to enjoy it. Maybe our manifesto should be “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Too many of us have believed that to mature, we had to basically become comatose. By this I mean we go through life on a sort of auto-pilot. Without Rhodas in our lives our minds can turn to mush or machines. We become people walking around waiting to die. Shall I close with giving us all a prescription today to help us reconnect with our Rhodas?

Why not this week, take time to play with a child, or read a children’s book to a child. Why not take the time to watch an animated movie about talking animals; better yet watch it with a child? When’s the last time you read a good fiction novel, or watched a television or movie series? When was the last time you laughed so hard, your belly ached and tears came to your eyes? When was the last time you were silly, and didn’t care who saw you or what they thought? When was the last time you bought a toy for someone instead of writing a check for a gift?

We need a Rhoda in our lives. A rosebud to blossom into the joy and abundance of life as God intended it.