
Go Deep with God: From Vacation Bible School to Paris Island and Back Again

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**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George M. Maxwell, Jr.
The Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5 - Year B**

It was great!

I felt like I had entered the newest attraction at the Georgia Aquarium when I walked into the Atrium. Long strips of blue material hung from the balcony, making me feel like I was under water. Laminated paper fish and other aquatic life appeared to be swimming over my head. I could just barely see the glint of the fishing line holding them up. Cardboard boxes carefully wrapped in craft paper lay on the tile like a living coral reef on the floor of the ocean. And, of course, the painted treasure chest was there, right in the middle.

Then, I saw the banner -- "Go Deep with God!"

This was the greeting that more than two hundred kids and another seventy-five volunteers received when they arrived on Monday morning for Week of Wonder, our annual vacation Bible school.

And, go deep they did.

Every day had a unique theme, story and song. Day Two, for example, was titled "Dare to Care." The kids worked with the story of the Good Samaritan, and learned the song "Dare to Care."

So love who you see.
I dare you, I dare you!
Help those in need.
I dare you, I dare you!
Show you believe.
I dare you, I dare you!

All of this came together in a celebration of the Eucharist on Friday morning. It was a sight to see. No one doubted the presence of Christ. Watching the kids sway to "Sanctuary" at the end of communion was enough to bring tears to your eyes. But, trust me, you haven't lived until you've seen Dorsey DeLong dance her way through the elaborate gestures and rap-like lyrics of "Dare to Care."

What happened during the service, though, was really a celebration of what had happened during the week. Kids who didn't know each other at the beginning had become friends by the end. Teenagers who came to volunteer forgot about the self-consciousness that they had brought with them. They engaged the kids -- listening to their stories, helping with their art projects, and fixing their snacks. Adults used to having more say in how things go found joy in letting the kids make more decisions for themselves.

What happened during the week was that we all became a sort of family. We learned to forget about ourselves, and to trust each other. We worked for the good of the group. "I" became "we," and "my" became "our." We lost ourselves in something larger than ourselves.

This is, I think, the sense of family that Jesus is talking about.

But, it goes much deeper than that. It's not just about being spiritual. It's about being religious.

It's not just about feeling good, or getting what you want, or even being forgiven. It's about taking on a new identity. It's about following a new way of life. It's about becoming a disciple of Christ.

Family was first in Jesus' world. Families lived together, worked together, cared for each other, held their property in common, and depended on each other for security. They often knew each other better than they knew themselves.

Loyalty to family was not about being gracious or respectful. It was about survival. It was the thread that held the fabric of their society together. Families depended on the loyalty of their members in the same way that Israel depended on the loyalty of God.

Think again about what is at stake when Jesus says that he is going deeper.

Jesus' mother and brothers have come down to Capernaum from Nazareth to get him. They tried to stop him from going into the house, but he ignored them. Now their fears are being confirmed. They send him a message. "You are stirring up the crowd. Worse, you are shaming us. They think you are mad. Listen to them. They think you are possessed. They are calling you the devil. Come out now. It's time to go home."

Jesus does not ignore them this time.

You know that he's going deeper. He passes by the opportunity to do what we expect. He doesn't try to calm their anxiety. He doesn't challenge their analysis. He doesn't try to set them straight, by saying things like "it's not as bad as it seems," or "I've got this -- we'll look good in the end."

Jesus is going deeper than that.

He challenges their most basic assumption. "Who is my mother?" he says. "Who are my brothers?"

Then, he turns to those sitting around him and says: "Here is my mother! , Here are my brothers! Anybody who does God's will is my brother! And my sister! And my mother!"

Jesus is creating a new family. He is defining the group in a new way. This time it's not about blood, as much as it is about faith. It's not about survival, as much as it is about God.

But, he holds onto the essence of what family means.

The best analogy I can think of for what Jesus is doing is the experience of Marine training camp on Parris Island, outside of Beaufort, South Carolina. The "Wall Street Journal" ran an article back in 1995 about this experience.

Back then, Parris Island proclaimed itself as "Where the Difference Begins."

But, it was really about family.

The drill instructors said then that many of the kids they were getting - "the children of the 1970s" -- had no sense of being responsible for themselves. They had grown up with baby sitters and in day care centers. "A lot of them," one drill instructor said, "if they come from a single-parent household and their mothers work, have had pretty much free rein ,."

"The Corps," the receiving sergeant said in a private moment, "is like a family and we teach family values."

They started by taking everything away. They shaved their heads and cut them off from their previous life.

Every waking moment was designed to remind the recruits of the brothers they were becoming. Pleasure was suspect and sacrifice was good. They learned to focus. There were no diversions -- no television, cigarettes, cars, candy, soft-drinks, video games, music, alcohol, or drugs.

They learned a new language. Doors were "hatches" and hats were "covers."

They learned that it wasn't about them anymore. They were forbidden even to use the first person. They either said "we" or they spoke about themselves in the third person.

And, then, a sense of family began to emerge.

They looked different. The fat ones thinned. The skinny ones thickened. The pale ones tanned.

They acted different. They stood tall and walked with a sense of purpose. They talked about the importance of honor, courage, and commitment. They overcame deep differences in class and race. They learned to work together as a team.

They had gone deep, through the profane and into the sacred.

They had become a sort of family. They had learned to forget about themselves, and to trust each other. They had learned to work for the good of the group. "I" had become "we," and "my" had become "our." They had lost themselves in something larger than themselves.

This is, of course, the shape of the Christian life as well.

Through the waters of baptism, we are adopted into a new family. We die to the old and are raised to a new life, reborn from above. We learn stories that tell us who God is. We engage in practices that form us into who we are becoming. We learn a new language - words like salvation, saved, sacrifice and redemption - that allows us to approach our relationship with God in a new way.

And, as we go deeper into God, we begin to forget about ourselves, and to trust each other. We learn to work for the good of the group. "I" becomes "we," and "my" becomes "our." We lose ourselves in something larger than ourselves.

If you think about it, you will realize that it is only after having had this experience that we begin to understand what it means to not have it. It is only after having experienced being in Christ in this way that we begin to understand what Sin really is. It is only after having had a glimpse of Heaven that we really know what Hell looks like.

There is a risk, though.

Once you have gone this deep, it can be hard to come back.

This is actually what is worrying the author of the article about Paris Island in the "Wall Street Journal." The article is titled "'New' Marines Illustrate Growing Gap Between Military and Society." The author notes nervously that the "family values" instilled in these Marines seems to leave them with a patriotism at odds with much of American culture.

He worries openly that these Marines may harbor a growing disdain for the society that they are to protect. They talked about the lack of discipline, the absence of any sense of virtue, and on the difficulty of going back to a society of "what's in it for me?"

Most of us don't have the luxury of segregating ourselves from the world. We are called to come back, to be in the world even if we are not of it.

And, how should we do it?

We don't have to change the world. God will do that. But, we do have to witness to it. We do have to testify to what it means to "go deep with God."

That's what families do for their neighbors.

So, dare to care.
Love who you see.

I dare you, I dare you!
Help those in need.
I dare you, I dare you!
Show you believe.
I dare you, I dare you!

Amen.

If you are interested in the description that I offer of the shape of the Christian life and the role of the Church in society, then you may enjoy reading "Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony," by Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

I have borrowed heavily from their analysis - particularly, their notion that "the political task of Christians is to be the church rather than to transform the world." (p. 38)

The article in the "Wall Street Journal" that I mentioned, and the idea to use it as an analogy for the role of practice in the Christian life, came from a second book by Hauerwas and Willimon, titled "Where Resident Aliens Live: Exercises for Christian Practice" (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), pp. 74 - 83.

The article in the "Wall Street Journal" was written by Thomas E. Ricks, and appeared in the Thursday, July 27, 1995, edition of the newspaper.