Sunday June 1, 1980

"A CREDIBLE FAITH" Galatians 5:22-25, Hebrews 6:1

Although the scripture lesson just read is from Galatians, I want to begin the sermon with a text from Hebrews 6:1, and then later we'll come back to the passage from Galatians. "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ, and go on to maturity. . ."

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament wants to warn his readers of two dangers which face them in the matter of their Christian faith. The first danger is that of drifting away from their faith because of apathy, inattention, and lack of discipline. And then one day when a person finds he or she needs a strong faith, there is none. A second danger is that of standing still in one's faith, trying hard to hold onto it, practicing it daily, but not growing or maturing, rather staying in the same place, and then one day losing one's faith because it is no longer adequate.

It is this second danger that I want to deal with this morning because there are those who refuse to grow up in their faith. They want to continue to deal only with the elementary doctrines over and over again, and thus never possess a credible faith which effects their lives and gives them the strength and courage to meet difficulties, tragedies and other obstacles. So our text reminds us-- "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity."

1. First there are those who refuse to grow up spiritually. Such individuals may have had some kind of conversion experience which affected them deeply, but they have never gone much beyond that. Instead they keep going back to it and re-living it. They never seem to go forward in maturity. It's like becoming a freshman in college and always wanting to remain a freshman and never go beyond that. Or it's like a person who never wants to leave the protective walls of home or school.

It's almost as if they are afraid to have their faith tested, or questioned. Rather they prefer to stay on the sidelines protecting their immature faith from anything that might threaten it.

2. Secondly, there are Christians who refuse to grow up intellectually as well as spiritually, and these two are often related. Such Christians have a second grade understanding of the Bible and church history and have never added to it or improved upon it. The only prayer they know is, "Now I lay me down to sleep." Recently I overheard two men arguing about their religion. One was insisting that he knew more about religion than the other. Finally, his friend said, "O.K. if you think you know so much, I'll bet you five dollars you can't recite the Lord's Prayer." The wager was accepted and the other fellow began, "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep," and on to the end of that prayer. Whereupon the man who had made the bet said, "Here's your five dollars, I didn't think you could do it."

Persons who have not grown intellectually in their faith have often matured in other areas of life. They may read widely in the fields of science, psychology, sociology, economics, political science and other areas of intellectual inquiry, but their growth is stunted when it comes to religion, and then one day they wonder why their Christian faith no longer fits the present day world and its problems.

There are too many people who are well past middle age and yet think of God and God's purposes and judgment and love and mercy exactly as they did when they were children. They know that large advances have been made in Biblical scholarship and theological thought over the years, but they wave them aside and mutter something about being satisfied with the simple gospel, as though the mystery of God becoming flesh could ever be called simple. Such people would be appalled at a physician who refused to learn about new drugs or a surgeon who would not authorize new anaesthetics on the ground that what was good enough in medicine fifty years ago is good enough today. As Christians we need to grow spiritually and intellectually if we are to have a credible faith.

3. Thirdly, there are Christians who refuse to grow up morally. They can recite the golden rule and maybe three of the ten commandments, but they haven't changed their basic behavior since they were children. They have the same prejudices that their parents had and never ask the tough moral questions. They are easily satisfied with simple answers to complex questions. They have not left the elementary doctrines and gone on to maturity.

Jesus Christ calls us to have a credible faith and a credible faith is one which is believable, measuring up to some standard of rationality and intellectual integrity. And at the same time a credible faith is one that goes beyond society's usual standard of rationality, because we know that faith always goes beyond reason and is more than reason. We know as Paul wrote that we always see in a mirror dimly; that a lot of what we think of as wisdom is foolishness as far as God is concerned. A credible faith therefore is one which takes reason, learning, searching, intelligence and thought very seriously and at the same time listens and learns from the emotions as well. It is furthermore a faith that is not only personal, but also concerned for the needs of others, a faith that involves the whole person and the whole of society.

A credible faith is one which knows that none of us become saints overnight no matter how powerful our conversion. We may be born again, but growth always takes time and learning and correction.

Picture an 18 month old infant suddenly grown within a month or two to his full physical stature. Instead of measuring thirty-one inches and weighing 25 pounds, he now stands six feet and weighs one hundred and ninety. Suppose also that during this month or two of rapid physical growth, his intellect has developed proportionately and he has even attended university and been granted a degree. In other respects, however he has not developed. He still slobbers and drools, still bellows when he is hungry, still goes into a temper tantrum at the least frustration. He understands nothing of how other people feel. He responds only to those who do things for him. He becomes sullen and suspicious. He has no real affection or loyalty. But with his superior physique and intellect he has enough strength and cunning to manipulate others to do his will, regardless of what is just or right.

It's a parable of many of us in our religious development, and a parable of our civilization. We are advanced physically and intellectually, but woefully immature morally and spiritually. We still think killing people will solve our problems; might makes right; and our interpretation of the golden rule is that he who has the gold, rules.

Christ calls us to be continually growing in our moral and spiritual development which is the deepening of our faith. Hopefully, we will be ridding ourselves of old faults and acquiring new virtues. Our lives will grow more lovely, more strong, more fine. The maturing Christian will radiate a new patience, a new serenity, a new unselfishness, a new nobility.

As Paul writes in our scripture lesson, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." Then we are on the way to a credible faith.