Sunday, September 4, 1988
WHY AREN'T THEY LIKE US? (No. 5 in a Series: Everyday Questions)
Matthew 7:24-29

A question which I hear parents asking frequently about their children, especially as their children grow up is: "Why aren't they like us?" Behind this question there are related questions — where did our children get their values? What makes them behave as they do? Not only do parents ask this question, but also those who have had no children. They look at the generation following them and ask: "Why aren't they like us?"

Maybe a story will help answer the question.

When Bob Brown was six weeks old, his parents took him to church and had him baptized. He was a darling baby with wide blue eyes and he was the third generation in that family to be baptized in Old First Church. His mother, Sue, could never remember afterward just what they had promised, but she never forgot the lump which came into her throat when the choir sang, "Let the little ones come unto me." They had a delicious dinner after the service. Her parents and her husband Walter's parents were there, and a college friend of Walter's who was jokingly referred to as the baby's godfather, whatever that meant.

The grandparents went home early. More friends of their own generation dropped in during the afternoon to help them celebrate, and the party became one to remember. The honorary godfather bubbled over the champagne and was quite a scream. The baby upstairs slept through it all like an angel.

About two years later, a daughter was born to Walter and Sue Brown. They named her Ann. Sue's mother died that same year and her father was breaking up his home to move in with a bachelor brother in another city. So with one thing and another, this baby was not baptized. "I'm really too busy now," Sue told the minister. She thought him rather cruel to even mention the matter. After all, she was confused and unhappy enough without being bothered about unimportant things.

The years passed and little Bob started Sunday School at age five. A neighbor picked him up and took him in her car, and if his father, Walter, felt like it, he went to pick up the child. However, when Walter had a golf date or wanted to sleep late, Bob could not go to Sunday School unless the neighbor was willing to miss church in order to bring him home. Fortunately, the neighbor belonged to Old First Church where Bob had been baptized, for both Walter and Sue wanted him to attend that church's Sunday School. After all, Sue's parents had belonged to that church and so had Walter's. But Bob himself was not too fond of Sunday School. Nothing in his early life had prepared him for the swarms of strange children he was supposed to call friends. However, experiences in the kindergarten in the public school helped to reconcile Bob to the other youngsters.

Sue had been a high school teacher herself, and she was very much interested in education. She joined the PTA and became very active in raising money for a milk fund. Walter spent one spare evening with other fathers of kindergarten pupils repairing little chairs. Once after collecting Bob and Ann from the Church School, he commented that the beginner's room there was rather shabby.

Bob and Ann were both in the primary department when the family moved. Walter's business was prospering, and the new house on the other side of town was more in keeping with their position in the community. But it was too far for the children to walk to Old First Church, and neither of the parents had time to take them very often. Their old neighbor lived too far away. Gradually, as they made friends in the new neighborhood, the children started attending a more fundamentalist church Sunday School nearer their new home.

Walter and Sue went to the Christmas pageant. The church was rather sweet and their daughter Ann made a darling angel. They were not impressed with their daughter's Church School teacher.

The minister of the church called twice before he found Sue home one afternoon. She apologized for her absence. "I'm so busy with the PTA," she said. "We're getting ready for the puppet show now. The proceeds will go to buy glasses for children whose parents can't afford them." She had hoped to sell the minister a ticket, but he already had one.

"I'm glad you're interested in education," the minister said, "we need Church School teachers badly." But Sue said that she could not think of taking on the responsibilities of a class while her children were small. Perhaps later. She was relieved that he had not asked her about Ann's baptism.

The children went to Sunday School quite regularly for the next two years. And the parents attended the church for the annual Christmas program.

On Easter Sunday, the whole family went back to Old First Church where Bob had been baptized. The faces of the people they had known, however, were becoming fewer, and although they had never transferred their membership, they began to feel it was no longer their church.

A few years later, on Easter when Bob was 10 years old, they attended the church near their home, and that August, Sue received a visit from the Church School Superintendent. "I came to ask you to teach a Sunday School class," she said. Her eyes roamed over the shelves filled with the latest books. "You've read all these books, why not the Bible?" Sue gave a small depreciating laugh. "It's so dull, don't you think?" She served tea and cookies, hoping none of her friends would drop in for cocktails until the woman from the Church School left. "Really," she said, "I can't take a class. I couldn't keep discipline. My husband, Walter? Oh mercy no. He's not interested in religion."

During the coming years, Walter's business prospered. He began to make big money. Before their son Bob had entered his teens, they had bought a summer place and built a cabin so they might extend the season over the weekends until the snow came.

In February of that year, the teacher who had taken Bob's Church School class called on Sue. She told her all the young people in the class had decided to join the church together at Easter, and that Bob had decided to join with them. However, he must first attend the pastor's class for six weeks, and after the first week, he hadn't shown up. "I'll speak to him," Sue promised. "But I don't know, he has so many activities and he belongs to a little club that meets on Saturday mornings." "It's only for six weeks," the teacher answered. "And it's very important for them to understand what they are getting into."

“Well, I don’t believe in forcing them,” Sue replied. “It’s a free country after all and children should pick out their own religion if they want one. I believe in letting them choose.”

“If you truly believed that, wouldn’t you go with them to every church in the city so that they might have a true choice?” asked the teacher quietly. “Your present attitude is the same as if you let your children pick the foods which they would eat and then prepared nothing for them to choose from.”

Sue was rather hurt. The teacher was single and couldn’t know very much about children anyway, and she was obviously a religious fanatic. By great effort of courtesy, she managed to keep the rest of the conversation off controversial themes and the teacher soon left.

Their son Bob never did join the church. He missed Sunday Church School most of the time that year because of going to their cabin, and the next year he didn’t like his new teacher. “She doesn’t know anything!” he complained. Walter, his father, said that boys usually lost interest in religion when they entered high school. He had. Sue said it was a shame the church could not get better teachers.

Bob did attend the youth group from time to time whenever he was home, and his sister Ann went with him. He had a crush on a girl in the group. Ann was approaching the age when all boys interested her.

Bob and Ann’s attendance with the youth group lasted about a year. Bob’s girlfriend moved away. Ann joined a high school sorority and her interests were confined to the activities of her friends. Her Church School attendance became more and more irregular. Saturday was her night for dates, and she was very popular. On Sunday mornings, she was really too tired to move from her bed. Her mother said she knew how Ann felt. She too had dropped out of church activities at that age.

The family continued to attend church on Christmas and Easter, if they were in town. Sue always went to the children’s programs. She liked to see the little ones in their pretty clothes.

The Vietnam War brought changes to the Brown family. Bob was drafted and was sent to Vietnam. Ann, still in college, eloped with a boy she met there and he soon entered the Armed Forces. Six months later, Walter and Sue were grandparents. Sue opened her heart and home to her daughter and granddaughter. Ann’s husband visited them when on leave and both Walter and Sue liked him very much. He was a spirited young man and very much in love with Ann, and a good sport.

Bob wrote from Vietnam that he too was in love. She was perfect, he said, an oriental beauty.

When the war ended there were more changes for the Brown family. Bob had married the young woman and brought her and their baby home. He had a good job lined up. They loved their daughter-in-law. Their only disappointment was in the fact that she practiced an oriental religion and their son Bob was becoming involved with that religion also.

“Why?” asked his father one night, while Bob’s wife was putting the baby to bed. “Well,” said Bob, “it’s simpler. I figured what my wife and daughter were going to be, I might as well be too. And it answers a lot of my questions about religion.”

Bob and his wife are happy. They have two children now and there is another one on the way. Sue goes over to stay with the children sometimes when their parents are out. Their house, however, makes Sue vaguely uncomfortable. There is no Bible on the living room table and she misses that.

Her daughter Ann's problems, however, are a greater burden. For Ann is not happy. Her marriage was based on "love," the fierce, passionate kind, and Ann's husband discovered exactly the same kind of love for a young woman in Hawaii. Ann is divorced now and living in New York. Her child is in a nursery school there so Ann can work. She seldom pays a visit to her old home.

Perhaps it is just as well, for Ann has turned from a gentle, sensitive person into a brittle, cynical one. She is bitter and has become a violently outspoken atheist. Sometimes when she is at home, she embarrasses her mother by the things she replies to the perfectly innocent remarks of her friends.

Sue is neither happy nor secure. She tells herself it is only middle-age settling in. After all, she is a grandmother. But on nights when her husband Walter is at the club or bowling to keep his waistline down, and on the weekends when he and his friends are at the cabin, Sue is left home alone and she frequently finds herself becoming depressed.

In spite of her volunteer work and her many social activities, she is beginning to feel that her life has been wasted. After all, her life is deadly routine, she tells herself, except for her children and she is disappointed in both of them. Walter is disappointed in them too. He voiced his regrets on a rare evening at home this fall, and Sue agreed with him. "I can't understand it," said Walter, "with all the advantages of a good home and a Christian community, why didn't they grow up to be good, decent Protestant Christians like you and me?"

Walter is also finding his life has less and less meaning. He has no framework or faith for understanding what is happening to him, and he worries more and more about the future.

Why aren't they like us? Maybe they are like us more than we realize.

Jesus said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a sensible individual who built a house on a rock. Down came the rain and up came the floods, while the winds blew and roared upon that house, and it did not fall because its foundations were on the rock. And those who hear these words of mine and do not follow them can be compared to a foolish person who built a house on the sand. Down came the rain and up came the floods, while the winds blew and battered that house till it collapsed and fell with a crash." Amen.