

When I Grow Up

Today's Bible readings ask the same question of all of you that I asked at children's time. *What do you want to be when you grow up?*

Adults do not get asked that very often. Older adults even less so. During my writing career, I would occasionally hear that question. It was kind of running critique on how writing wasn't a real job, and sooner or later I would have to grow up and find actual work.

But for the most part, we assume that "what do you want to be when you grow up" is a question for children only. It is usually a nicely dressed up way of asking "How are you going to earn a living when you reach adulthood?"

The first letter of John explores the question "what do you want to be when you grow up," in a slightly different way. "We are God's children now," says 1 John. "What we will be has not yet been revealed." It basically says to all Christians, "We know what we are. But we don't know yet what we're going to be when we grow up."

In a lot of ways that verse reminds me of baptism. We had five baptisms in March, which is the most I can remember in one month at St. John's. When Pastor Christine or I declare during this rite that the baptized is God's child, we are announcing that this is the beginning of a new journey of faith.

I have looked into the eyes of many a tiny, almost weightless and utterly clueless little bundle as I pour water on the child's head. And as I do, I cannot help but wonder where this faith journey will take this little person. For this child, life is filled with promise, with hopes and dreams.

What kind of a journey will it be? In what direction will this life go? We can only imagine, because it has not yet been revealed to us.

Similar thoughts run through me at confirmation time. At St. John's we have had these kids in class since they were in 5th grade through 9th grade. The growth they achieve during that time is remarkable. Some of them are hardly recognizable from who they were when they started.

Their maturity has grown. Their understanding has grown. Their possibilities have grown. And you can tell, there is so much more to come. Where is this faith journey going to take them? Again, we can only speculate, because we simply cannot know the future.

The verse from 1 John seems to neatly sum up both cases: “This is God’s child now. That’s all we know for sure. What they are going to be when they grow up has yet to be revealed.”

But then the exact reverse happens to me at funerals. It is particularly striking when we have a funeral service the same week as a baptism.

As I stand beside this baptismal font that overlooks the pall-covered urn or casket, I find myself imagining the day when this person’s journey in faith began at a font similar to this one. For some of them it actually began at a font as this very church.

I picture a time when this person’s life was a blank slate filled with promise and anticipation, hopes and dreams. When all that was known was that this was God’s child, and that what this child would grow up to be had yet to be revealed. And now as we come to the point when all that this person would become *has* finally been revealed, we look backward on the journey that led to places we could never have predicted, and give thanks for the gift of life.

In 1 John, the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up” is aimed as much as adults as at anyone else. And it has less to do with what career we choose than it does with how we plan to live our lives.

This is the question that lies at the center of our Gospel reading for today. It describes the encounter the disciples have with Jesus at a crossroads in their lives. Their world has been turned upside-down by the events of Holy Week--the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

All they are clinging to is that they are beloved children of God; that never changes. What is not known at this point is what they will become.

Based on past performance, the smart money would have bet that they would not amount to much. Throughout the Gospels, they did not show a great deal of leadership potential, compassion, insight, courage, or even intelligence. Were they interviewing with the candidacy committee of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, it’s hard to imagine them sailing through without major reservations.

Fortunately, though, what we are to become is not something that is decided once and for all at an early age. It is not something that is fully known during our lives. In fact, I would argue, based on 1 John, that what we are to become is an open issue for as long as we continue to draw breath.

When I was on a call committee before I went into the ministry, we got some advice from an interim pastor that seemed a little strange at the time, but I have since

come to see the wisdom of it. He said, “Always remember that the pastor you call is not the pastor you will get.”

Yes, there will be many things you can count on beyond a reasonable doubt as far as range of experience, effectiveness of communicating, theology, abilities, capacity for compassion, how they fit the congregational profile, and other traits. Those things will give a general idea of how the new person will answer the call.

But every call is a new experience, and none of us knows how we will be shaped by new experience. What we will be in this new experience has not been revealed to us.

I had been at St. John’s only a short time when I lost both my parents within 7 months. I don’t care who you are; that changes a person. Suddenly, I was not the pastor this congregation called, and there is no way that change could have been predicted.

This uncertainty as to what we will be can cause anxiety, in that we never have any guarantees on how our future will turn out.

I know some wonderful people who fight hard against this. They are meticulous planners. From an early age, they have had every detail in their life mapped out: marriage, number and spacing of children, vocation, location, lifestyle, floor plan of their house, retirement.

But that is a risky thing to do because by the time we have reached many a crossroad in our lives, we are no longer the person who made these plans. Do we really want to be bound by someone else’s idea of how we should live our life?

1 John, like much of the Bible, is meant to ease our fears over the future—over what we are going to be--by building on what we do know.

What is known is this: You are God’s child. As long as you continue to live as a child of God, as long as love is your guide, then what you are to become, whatever it may be, is going to be a blessing. As long as we live that way, then the prospect of becoming a new person should always be exciting.

This is the week for one-on-one meetings with our 9th grade confirmands. They are getting close to making some serious, public promises as they affirm their faith in few weeks. Some of them are a little unsure as to what they are committing to. Do they have to buy in to every bit of doctrine in Luther’s catechism for the rest of their lives?

Our tendency to make confirmation a rite of passage into adult membership in the church carries an unfortunate consequence. It gives the impression that those who are

confirmed have reached the end. They have become, spiritually, what they are going to be. When in fact, what they are to become has not yet been revealed.

What I tell anxious confirmands is that we are not asking, “Is that your final answer?” When Jesus’ disciples were at least twice your age, they did not have all the answers. They were still growing in faith. Even when they answered the same question you have been called to answer in confirmation: “Who do you say Jesus is?” they did not have it all figured out.

They certainly had no idea of what they would become. All they knew for certain was that Jesus loved them. At the end of the Gospel they came to realize that living in this love and reflecting it to others would bring them to a new and better life.

That is all they needed to know in order to become people they never imagined they could be. People who changed the world.

I tell confirmands that what I believed when I was confirmed and what I believe now as a Christian are very different things. There is a lot of daylight between what I believed going into seminary, and what I believe now. And this year, as I head into retirement, I can assure them that I do not yet know what I am going to be when I grew up. That is what living and learning is all about.

What has not changed is that I know I am God’s child. I know that you are God’s child. As long as you continue to live as a child of God, as long as love is your guide, then what you are to become, whatever it may be, is going to be a blessing. What you are promising at your affirmation of baptism is that you will continue to live as a child of God, with love as your guide.

The downside of announcing a retirement so far in advance is that I occasionally feel like the peasant in *Monty Python & the Holy Grail* being hauled to the cart where all the plague victims are being stacked, all the time insisting, “But I’m not dead yet!”

There is more to do at St. John’s. The full story of what we will do here together has not yet been revealed.

Retirement does not mark the end of who we will be. It’s another growth opportunity—another time of living and learning. I pray that when the end of my time on earth closes in, that I am still in the process of becoming. I pray that until I close my eyes for the last time, what I am to be when I grow up will not yet have been fully revealed. I pray that for all of you.

A Catholic priest named John Powell had an interesting thing to say about what the unrevealed future holds for all of us. For some people the future is already fully revealed.

Powell writes, “If you promise me that you are going to stay within your comfort zone, I will be able to tell you what you will be like at that end of your life. You will be just what you are now, only more so.

“If you promise me that you are going to stretch, to step outside your comfort zone, I cannot predict your future. The sky is the limit.”

Knowing that we are God’s children is what makes it possible to live life to the fullest. Like the disciples, to take a chance on new life.

I do not know what lies in store for you, as individuals. I do not know what is in store for St. John’s as a congregation. That has not yet been revealed.

But I know that we are all children of God. I believe that as long as each of us continues to live as a child of God, as long as love is our guide, then what we are to become, whatever that may be, is going to be a blessing, and the sky is the limit.