

The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Life Together: Practicing Faith with Adolescents

Introduction

“And they devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

“Get a life!” adolescents are told by their peers, their parents, and the media. But just how does a young person get a life? What kind of life can they get? Left to their own resources, adolescents will look for meaning and purpose in friendships, service, and faith or in cliques, drugs, sex, and violence.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Christ offers not only “a life” but abundant life. And he calls the church to live out together the life he offers. We are called to invite and to guide young people into life with Christ—and to live it together with them. Christian practices—worship, prayer, giving to those in need, Bible study, forgiveness, the sacraments—provide a way to live out the abundant life of faith with young people. These and other Christian practices are acts that identify us as, and form us into, the people of God, the church. Because they shape our identity in Jesus Christ, practices are essential to ministry with adolescents. When “doing” faith through Christian practices, young people discover they don’t need to “get a life” because they already enjoy abundant life in Christ.

The 2000 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, with their focus on Christian practices, push us toward seeing the Christian faith as a way of life. Dorothy C. Bass explores “life together” as a worthy pattern of living in which many people can share. She calls young people to identify themselves not primarily as consumers, but as practitioners of a way of life. Highlighting the Christian practice of breaking bread, Bass demonstrates how Christ transforms the practices of our life and faith.

Ellen T. Charry posits that many adults have retreated from the lives of adolescents rather than take up the difficult work of transmitting enduring moral values. Youth do not need “space,” she argues. They need Christian adults in their life as a sign that they have an identity and a destiny in life and belong to something stronger than their peer group. Charry challenges us to offer youth an alternative to the ideology of autonomy by helping them to reclaim their baptismal identity every day in service, in prayer, and especially at the Lord’s Supper.

L. Gregory Jones lifts up the power of caring mentors forming young people in Christian faith and proposes rethinking confirmation as apprenticeship. Jones then argues that grace and obligation belong together, with Christian practices, or obligations, opening up our receptivity to grace. He encourages

us to instill in youth the importance of cultivating habits oriented toward the grace we find in Jesus Christ.

James M. Wall invites us to join a search for grace in the practices of everyday life. He examines the secularity that stands as a barrier to finding God's grace and then considers avenues to finding God's grace within that very secularity. Our society, says Wall, is dominated by people and institutions that want to keep the sacred from being an essential part of our private and public lives. Wall challenges us to lead youth out of the secular mind-set and into a larger space where God will find us with a redemptive word of grace.

May these lectures encourage you and the youth you serve to practice the faith as you live in grateful response to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Institute for Youth Ministry

2000 Lectures

Dorothy C. Bass

"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": The Consumer and the Practitioner
"Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ": Practicing Life Abundant

Ellen T. Charry

Grow Big and Tall and Straight and Strong
Thinking Ourselves Outward from God

L. Gregory Jones

The Apprentice's New Clothes: Shaping Christian Community
The Grace of Daily Obligation: Shaping Christian Life

James M. Wall

Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Searching for Grace in the Stuffness of the Secular
Practicing Faith with Adolescents: Overcoming Secular Barriers to God's Grace



The Apprentice's New Clothes: Shaping Christian Community¹

Many years ago, Hans Christian Andersen tells us, there lived an emperor who was so fond of new clothes that he spent all his money on them.² He did not care for other needs; nor, for that matter, did he tend to the needs of his soldiers. He spent all of his time in his dressing room, admiring his clothes.

One day, two swindlers came. As Andersen tells the story, "They claimed that they were weavers and said they could weave the finest cloth imaginable. Their colours and patterns, they said, were not only exceptionally beautiful, but the clothes made of this material possessed the wonderful quality of being invisible to any man who was unfit for his office, or who was hopelessly stupid."³

The emperor was impressed at the prospect, and found this a wonderful way to tell which people in the empire were unfit for their posts, as well as to tell the clever from the stupid. He gave the men large amounts of money in advance so they could set to work at once. The two men pocketed the money even as they pretended to work on the clothes.

Eventually, the emperor became curious about the progress on the clothes. He did not think he had anything to fear for himself, "yet he thought he would send somebody else first to see how things were progressing." "Everybody" in the town was aware of the wonderful qualities the cloth possessed, and they "all were anxious to see how bad or stupid their neighbours were."⁴

The emperor decided to send his "honest old minister" to the weavers. The emperor was sure that the minister's unquestionable intelligence and fitness for office would make him a good emissary. The minister went to see the swindlers and was astonished because he could not see anything at all. But he did not say anything. The

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swindlers urged him to look closer. He began to question his own intelligence and fitness for office, and decided not to tell anyone that he had been unable to see the cloth.

Indeed, the old minister finally announced to the swindlers that the cloth "is very pretty—quite enchanting! What a pattern, and what colours! I shall tell the Emperor that I am very much pleased with it." The swindlers continued to ask for more money, more silk, and more gold.⁵

This pattern continued as the emperor sent another honest official to check on the weavers' progress. He could not see anything, for there was nothing to be seen. But he questioned himself, and eventually praised the cloth, "which he did not see, and expressed his pleasure at the beautiful colours and the fine pattern."⁶

"Everybody" in town was talking about the beautiful cloth. Finally the emperor went with a company of chosen courtiers, including the two honest councillors who had already been there, to see what was happening. The two honest statesmen both said to the emperor, "Is it not magnificent?" "Look, your Majesty, what a pattern! What colours!" They imagined the others could see the cloth.

The emperor was shocked because he could not see anything at all. But he did not want to admit that perhaps he was stupid or even unfit to be emperor. So he announced that the cloth was very beautiful, and all of the courtiers rapidly agreed. "They advised him to wear the new magnificent clothes at a great procession that was soon to take place."⁷ The emperor awarded each of the swindlers the cross of the order of knighthood and the title of imperial court weavers.

The next day, the swindlers showed the emperor and his courtiers his new clothes. They exclaimed, "They are all as light as a cobweb! They make one feel as if one had nothing on at all, but that is just the beauty of it." The emperor took off his clothes so that he could be helped to put on the new clothes, one piece after another.

"Oh, how well they look! How well they fit!" said all. "What a pattern! What colours! Magnificent indeed!"⁸ All pretended that they saw the emperor's new clothes, including the chamberlains who were to carry the train. No one wanted to be revealed as unfit for office or stupid. "None of the emperor's clothes had ever been such a success."⁹

"But he has nothing on at all," said a little child. "Good heavens! Hear what the innocent child says!" said the father, and then each whispered to the other what the child had said: "He has nothing on—a little child says he has nothing on at all!" "He has nothing on at all," cried all the people at last. "And the emperor too was feeling very worried, for it seemed to him that they were right, but he thought to himself, 'All the same, I must go through with the procession.' And he held himself stiffer than ever, and the chamberlains walked on, holding up the train which was not there at all."¹⁰

Another great storyteller, Jesus of Nazareth, said, “Except as you become a little child....” It was, after all, the child who was the only one with the courage to speak the truth about the emperor’s (lack of) new clothes. Except for the witness of that child, everyone in the city was willing to live in a world of deception and lies—a world Christians have identified as marked by sin. And even after the child names the truth, the people—and the emperor—do not have the resources to know how to change their way of life. And so the charade continues.

The emperor’s new clothes invited him, and others around him, to pretend to see something that wasn’t there. By contrast, the clothes that Christians put on in baptism invite us, and others around us, to see that which really *is* there—to become truthful with ourselves and with one another in fidelity to God. In a classic passage in Galatians 3, Paul writes, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:27-28)

But what happens when we clothe ourselves with Christ? Does the transformation occur overnight, as if by some magical twitch of the lips? Or does it begin as a process of initiation into habits and practices of a way of life, an initiation in which we become apprentices to those who have gone before us?

I suggest that Jesus’ announcement and enactment of God’s inbreaking reign was designed to call people away from the deceptive sinfulness of the emperor’s world and to a different way of life. Jesus knew that such a different way of life would not be possible unless it was accompanied by a profound turning and by the cultivation of a markedly different set of habits. So he called disciples into a new community and began to teach them along the way. He called them to a life with God marked by forgiveness and repentance, shaping a truthful community capable of radical discipleship and witness in the world.

Why do we need to be apprenticed into a new community and a new way of life? On one hand, whether it is gleaned from Hans Christian Andersen or from studies by Milgrom and others about the impact of peer pressure, we have a clear sense of the extraordinary influence that unjust and sinful social contexts and systems bring to bear on otherwise good and honest ministers, councillors, and courtiers. And, on the other hand, whether gleaned from Hans Christian Andersen, from the author of Genesis or from Jonah, Jesus, or writers through the history of the Christian tradition, we also know of the temptations in our hearts and in our habits that lead us to diminish ourselves and others through swindling, thinking too highly or too lowly of ourselves, or through other patterns of sin.

The story of the emperor’s new clothes reminds us that our choice is not really whether we will be apprentices or not. Indeed, the whole city—from the honest old

minister and the other councillors and courtiers to the ordinary citizens—was hooked into a deception. They were, in effect, apprentices in lying with one another. So also do we become habituated to patterns and habits of greed, racism, sexism, lying, shielding our eyes from the poor, and ignoring the plight of our own souls.

The choice is to whom we will apprentice ourselves. Will we become apprentices to the saints who bear witness to God's inbreaking reign—both those who have gone before us and the saints-in-the-making that lead and sustain healthy Christian communities? In ancient practices of Christian catechesis, there were clear and marked ways in which people were identified and nurtured as apprentices in Christian faith and life. More recently, such apprenticeship characterized my own tradition through the Wesleyan class meetings of the eighteenth century. I am convinced that we will most faithfully bear witness to our knowledge and love of God in direct proportion to our recovery of what it means to discover the truthful discipleship found in the Christian apprentice's new clothes.

Apprenticeship in Christian Life

Our life in the church is, I believe, fundamentally an ongoing apprenticeship in which we both have mentors within the church and are involved in mutual apprenticeship. The only perfect mentor, the one who provides the criteria for our own apprenticeship, is Jesus Christ.

In the early church, if one wanted to become a Christian, the first step was to become an inquirer and to enter into a process that could take two or three years. In this process, people began to learn how to live and to think as Christians while preparing for baptism. But could this happen today?

Church traditions that practice adult baptism could still easily adapt that process for their own instruction in preparation for baptism. Traditions that practice infant baptism could also adapt this model because I imagine many mainline Protestant youth groups have an increasing number of youth who have never been baptized as infants. Even for those who still widely practice infant baptism, such a process of instruction ought to be linked to patterns of confirmation.

Hence, I want to describe this early church pattern because it provides an important context for understanding the power of apprenticeship and formation in Christian life. It also stands in stark contrast to many of the assumptions that we have about Christian initiation in American culture.

For example, I was confirmed at age thirteen. The focus of my six-week confirmation was whether I knew the structure of the United Methodist Church. The confirmation process has improved some. My oldest son is thirteen and was just confirmed in the same denomination—not in a congregation either my wife or I serve, but one we attend and participate in. The process there is thirteen weeks and is well-

intentioned, but it still does not provide the kind of robust formation that people need for learning to live as Christians—even, or especially, the children of clergy!

There is a stark contrast between what most of us do in the context of preparation for baptism, confirmation with youth, or church membership with adults and what was undertaken in the early church. This contrast isn't simply a contrast between pre-Christendom and post-Christendom. Indeed, the example I will draw on most directly is from St. Augustine and the practices in North Africa in the late fourth century. Recently some of my most fascinating reading has been Augustine's sermons that were directed to people in the catechumenate who had been recently baptized.

For example, in a sermon delivered to the newly baptized on Easter evening, Augustine tells these new Christians that he is worried about their future life as Christians. But, perhaps surprisingly given at least some descriptions of Augustine, he tells them that he really isn't too worried about the effects of the pagan world and pagan neighbors on their Christian life. He is far more worried about the effects that lazy believers will have in encouraging them no longer to be as focused in their Christian lives. Doesn't that sound familiar, even at the turn of the twenty-first century?

The formation of Christian life over time was a central issue for Augustine and for the early church more generally. They understood that learning to live as a Christian, not simply being identified as a church member, is the purpose of Christian initiation. Some of you probably know the story of the three pastors talking about the bats in the bell tower. The first one says, "I haven't been able to get the bats out of our bell tower. I took up some bat poison and sprayed it all around. They left for a few days but they came back." The second one said he had the same problem. "I took a shotgun up to our bell tower, fired a few shots, killed one, and the rest flew away, but they came back within just a few days." The third one said he hadn't had any more problems with the bats in his bell tower. The others asked, "How did you manage that?" He said, "It was simple. I just baptized and confirmed all of them, and I haven't seen a one of them since."

When we have abbreviated patterns of preparation for baptism or confirmation, when we still assume that people are going to learn how to be Christian just by osmosis, then we run the danger of their losing their way as they grow into late adolescence and, even more so, go to college. We can no longer presume that either the wider culture, or what used to be considered the Christian infrastructure of church camps, youth groups, and Christian colleges, will create that same sort of patterning (for both good and for ill) as in previous generations. It simply isn't there for most young people.

Thus it is important to be more intentional about the ways people are initiated into the Christian faith. We can learn from the early church as we reflect on how to appren-

tice people more faithfully. In the early church, if you wanted to become a Christian, you started out as an inquirer. You were assigned as an apprentice to a mentor, a sponsor, whose responsibility was to spend time with you to show what it would mean to live as a Christian. The mentor would actually accompany you in your daily life to learn what it meant to show and to receive hospitality, what it meant to be a forgiven and forgiving person, what it meant to reflect on who God is and how God is related to the world.

In addition, as an apprentice, an inquirer, you would listen to sermons in the context of participation in worship that would begin to enrich your understanding of God and of the patterns of Christian life. As you moved closer to the time of actually declaring yourself ready for baptism, there was even more rigorous scrutiny and teaching during the Lenten season in preparation for baptism on Easter.

During the period prior to Lent, for as long as two or three years, the focus for your apprenticeship was learning that Christianity involves a way of life, a way that you need to learn from someone who is already further along the path. The presumption was that you needed to be shown how to live as a Christian—not simply told, not simply instructed, but shown in a way shaped by friendship. In that friendship, conversations could arise about how you are engaged in the activities of apprenticeship, what they signify, and how practices such as giving and receiving hospitality or forgiving and being forgiven reflect the convictions we hold about God, Christ, the world, and what it means to turn away from patterns of sin and to learn ways of holiness.

We know that such apprentice-mentor relationships are crucial for learning other activities, such as the piano and basketball. In other life settings, we know that one needs mentors for guidance. But somehow we have lost the sense that Christian life involves the same kind of learning.

Take an example from another profession: medicine. I have had a dozen surgeries on my knees over the years. Several years ago I had surgery on one of my knees at Duke Hospital. One of the blessings of being at a university teaching hospital is that the best surgeons are on site. One of the curses is that it is a teaching hospital. After surgery, my knee had an eight- to ten-inch incision that was painful and would take a long time to heal. Just after surgery, my knee was particularly sore and swollen, and the surgeon came by to check on me. He started feeling around the incision. I was cringing, ready to scream, but I knew he was doing his job. He wanted to feel if the surgery was holding. Even so, it hurt to have him poking around. When he stopped, I breathed a sigh and was glad it was over.

Then he turned to the person behind him and said, “Now here’s where you have to feel.” I thought, “Oh, no.” I looked and there was a line of people ready to take their turns learning what it feels like to touch a post-surgery incision made to repair

a dislocating kneecap. The line of people seemed to extend all the way down the hall.

There is only so much a person preparing to be a physician can learn by sitting in a classroom. A significant part of becoming a physician involves learning how to feel the incision where the problem was and, in the process, learning what the correction was designed to do. It involves a mentor taking the apprentice and helping her actually experience the diagnostic work.

That model was undertaken in the early church. If you want to learn how to be a Christian, have someone take you along and show you how you live, how you reach out to others, how you establish relationships, how you begin to reflect on who God is, and then in that context you have a richer setting for cognitive learning, for understanding the faith.

To be sure, understanding the faith is always important. But the early church focused on that particularly in the time immediately before baptism—after one had already been involved in the process of learning to live and think as a Christian. During the forty days prior to the baptismal service on Easter, there was a focused study of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed.

Note the apprentice's request to Jesus that leads to the Lord's Prayer: "Lord, teach us to pray." We need someone else to teach us, to show us how to pray, to help us understand the mode of address we should offer to God and for what we should ask. Even more, we need a wiser person to talk us through the times when we don't know how to pray, when we seem like we want to start praying and feel like we're encountering a void, or when we decide to start a discipline of prayer and find ourselves falling asleep. If I had a dollar for every time I started or stopped a discipline of prayer, I would be a wealthy man. We need others who can apprentice us and show us how to pray, as well as help us understand the beliefs embedded in our prayer.

Christianity As a Way of Life

The model of apprenticeship for Christian initiation was shaped by a sense that people are on a journey. Being initiated into Christian faith should be a process of learning a way of life, not simply something done on Sunday morning, not simply a set of convictions you hold or feelings you experience, not only something you do on a two-week mission trip during the summer. Christian faith involves a journey of learning to hold everything together in life, of learning to think, to live, to feel as a Christian throughout your life. Youth today have learned to compartmentalize their lives just as adults have.

By contrast, the model of apprenticeship, of learning how to embody Christian faith as a way of life, requires that we resist compartmentalization and find ways of holding things together through Christ. Apprenticeship carries with it the presump-

tion that the Christian life is not only a matter of beliefs to be believed, nor simply a matter of dispositions to be felt, nor simply actions to be undertaken. It involves all three of these in a complex interrelationship that is nurtured and developed over time with mentors guiding us along the way.

An example of this interrelationship is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not only something that we believe or speak, nor is it only something that we feel or do. It is a complex set of beliefs, words, and feelings, as well as actions. Forgiveness takes time to nurture and develop. One of my favorite lines from C.S. Lewis is found in one of his letters to Malcolm. He writes, "Last week, while at prayer, I suddenly discovered—or felt as if I did—that I had really forgiven someone I have been trying to forgive for over thirty years. Trying, and praying that I might."¹¹ Think about what was going on thirty years ago—Nixon was President, America was in Vietnam. It's a long time to stay with the issue of forgiveness. But Lewis understood the timefulness of what is at stake in forgiveness.

I've been trying to teach my kids about the importance of forgiveness. We have two boys and a girl. The two boys are fairly close in age, so I now believe the story of Cain and Abel is empirically verifiable. They go back and forth at each other, and I've been trying to explain to them that after a conflict, which is at least a couple of times a day, they need to apologize and seek forgiveness and reconciliation with one another. They've at least discovered the principle of it because, after my middle son Benjamin recently hauled off and smacked his older brother, I told him he had to apologize. He did and said loudly, "I'M SORRY."

You can understand if his brother didn't exactly feel the full warmth of the apology in a way that made a dramatic difference. Yet the words spoken were important, even though the emotions and actions were lacking. The words set a context in which we could return to the importance of reconciliation.

At other times, in other relationships, the emotions may begin to thaw but you don't really want to say anything or do anything, and you're not sure if you want to believe anything. And yet you find the emotions beginning to warm. You have better feelings toward someone, but you don't want to risk saying anything. You don't want to risk doing anything, because it's still too risky and scary, so the feelings are what lead you along until you can actually do or say something.

Sometimes the actions lead the way in forgiveness. Perhaps you send a note or a card or a box of chocolates. Sometimes the actions in the context of worship lead the way because Christians actually do things with and toward one another, like passing the peace. My wife was a local church pastor in Baltimore for years. She was preaching and presiding one Sunday; I was serving as liturgist on the other side of the chancel. There was a particular person in the church who was very difficult and was known to be trying to undermine Susan's and my work in the church. I didn't like her,

and she didn't much like me. In this particular service I was sitting up there minding my own business and hadn't really paid attention to the fact that Susan was getting ready to call for us to pass the peace to one another.

If you are aware of what's going to happen, you can plot your own strategy regarding whom you want to go to and whom you want to avoid. But I wasn't paying attention and I didn't develop a clear strategy. Susan said, "As forgiven and reconciled people, let us offer signs of peace to one another." The woman I wanted to avoid sings in the choir and sat very close to where I was sitting. After Susan called us to pass the peace, I stood and looked around. The woman I wanted to avoid was the only person anywhere near me. There she was in front of God and everybody, in front of the church. And so, perhaps by habit more than anything else, we turned and embraced. I couldn't bring myself to say anything to her, but the action began to work on my soul even as my stomach was churning.

She looked at me and said we ought to talk. The action, a gesture within the context of the church, set the stage for us to be able to talk differently to one another after the church service. The emotions began to thaw even though they were complex. In the context of any relationship, different dynamics emerge. Sometimes the words will lead, other times the emotions or the actions may lead. Typically they are interrelated in complex and even jumbled ways. It is not a linear process over thirty years. There are ups and downs, fits and starts.

Those who have spent a long time in the church, growing in the faith, are called to help apprentices learn to understand the depths and riches of what Christian faith involves as a way of life. We need robust initiation and then an ongoing process of sustained learning over time.

Can you imagine if in the midst of all the conflict and violence that exists in our culture, especially that our youth face, we took significant time in the preparation for confirmation to consider what we say in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"? Or to consider what we really claim to mean when we say we believe in the forgiveness of sins in the Apostles' Creed? What could happen if we really began to talk about how forgiveness might make a difference in our reactions that are often more violent and "tit-for-tat" than they are signs of God's redemptive work in the world?

Christian Life As Mutual Apprenticeship in Community

Initiation into a way of life takes time and requires intentionality precisely because we live so much of our lives in the emperor's world, and the emperor's world cuts not only through our churches but also through our own souls. Hence, we need that kind of mutual apprenticeship where we are guided by mentors who have gone before

us as well as those who are around us.

In order to stir our imaginations, we need to tell the stories of the saints. I don't know whether your tradition lifts them up in any formal way—the Wesleyan tradition does to a certain extent, but not in the way that Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Catholics do. The All Saints' service has become the most significant service of the year for me. It has become an occasion for the churches of which we have been a part to tell the stories of saintly lives, some famous and well-known, others far more subtle and ordinary.

I love to tell the story of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and death because I find it powerful and extraordinary that someone would have risked as much as he did; but sometimes telling that story seems too unreal, too far removed from our daily lives. The heroic character of his life can actually diminish our capacity for action, leading us to say, "Oh wow, that was great, but I'm just not like him." There are people in a congregation, in a family, within a church tradition, who in very ordinary ways live saintly lives. We can become apprentices, too, in the stories of their lives. But even more, it is the people around us, people who have gone farther than we have, who can help us grow—even as, perhaps, we might be able to help them grow.

This mutual apprenticeship is shaped by, and shapes, the habits and convictions of Christian community. The Methodist tradition was originally given life in eighteenth-century England by mutual apprenticeship. People gathered together every week in discipleship groups, communities where people told the stories of their lives to one another. They listened to one another, asked one another about how they were living as disciples, and prayed for one another.

This kind of commitment to friendship is both crucial for Christian life and one of the real hungers of youth in our culture. Young people desperately want to find a place where, as the *Cheers* theme song puts it, "Everybody knows your name," to be known, recognized, and cared about by someone who knows them well. Youth want a community that will be there when home is burdensome, or when they have had a relationship fall apart, or when school is too difficult, or when they have gotten into trouble. Is there someone who not only knows their names but also their stories?

As I have thought about what animated the early Methodist movement and what it meant for people from all walks of life and social groups to be initiated into Christian faith as a way of life, I have concluded that what made those communities powerful were relationships where people could challenge one another about the vices that they had come to love and could affirm with one another the gifts they were afraid to claim.

It is not hard to challenge the vices I already hate. If I despise something and don't do it, I'm quite happy to talk with you about it for a very long time. You admonish me not to do it, and it won't be any problem at all. Cigarette smoking: I did it for a while

as a kid, but don't do it anymore. I don't like it. I don't like to be around it, and if you tell me that it's bad for my health, I will gladly agree. We can discuss it, and I will feel self-righteous and happy and go away content. But don't start talking to me about those vices that I've come to love, those sins that shape too much of my life.

Don't talk to me about greed or how I distribute my financial resources. That will hurt. Don't talk to me about issues of truthfulness, or stubbornness, or temper, because those issues cut close to my heart. There are other crucial issues on which people who know me well know how to challenge me. I need to be challenged. Youth, who are at a critical stage in the formation of their identity, really do want help in challenging their vices if that help is given in a context of trust and friendship. They want help avoiding those things that are diminishing and destroying their character.

But not only that. If the only message they get is challenge about their vices, they will conclude that the church is all about negativity and saying no. Christian community needs also to *affirm* the gifts that people are afraid to claim. It's a great thing to affirm the gifts people are comfortable with. My son is a good basketball player, and he's very happy when I tell him, "You're really playing a great game!" He smiles, nods his head. It's nice to hear that from his dad, but he doesn't need to hear it because he already believes it.

It is his other gifts that need affirmation, the ones he's not quite ready to claim for himself. That kind of encouragement pushes one to go on, to move to a deeper level in discipleship and relationship with God. When people who know you do that, it makes a critical difference. This shapes Christian community through mutual apprenticeship.

This apprenticeship often occurs in the midst of shared practices. One of my most decisive discernments came while digging ditches in New Mexico as part of a youth work project. One of my close friends called me to account in a way I wasn't particularly happy with—to put it mildly. I dug some very deep ditches with the pickaxe as I imagined that person in the dirt. And yet being called to account at that time was a decisive turning point in my own self-understanding.

That is Christian community at its best, when the diversity of gifts found in baptism as the body of Christ can be nourished and enriched and enlivened and we can be sent on a journey that lasts throughout life.

The early church recognized that Christian life is a journey and that our initiation into Christian faith introduces us to a drama. Holy Week took on a dramatic character because the first Christians believed that Christian initiation ought to be reflective of the drama of Christian life. And when it came time for Easter Sunday morning, they literally had new clothes for those who were going to be baptized, and there was a celebration and a sense of drama that this was about God and about the transformation of life and the cultivation of a community.

It was a sense of drama that I dare say could compete with a lot of the things that our youth have competing for their attention in our culture. But this dramatic approach to Christian initiation was set in a context that provided an alternative to destructive cultural realities—an alternative to a consumerism that is never satisfying, to a sexually obsessed world lacking true intimacy, or to a violent world that diminishes and destroys people and leaves them with so much pain. Rather, this dramatic sense of Christian life offered a sense of joy and of bringing people together into an exciting, life-giving community. And the celebration was not just on Sunday morning. It continued for eight days. I doubt that many of those people ever forgot their initiation.

Rethinking Confirmation As Apprenticeship

When my wife, Susan, and I were serving a church in Baltimore, we decided the best way to cultivate the youth ministry program of our congregation was by patterning the confirmation process after the early church's.¹² We lengthened the process beyond the ordinary six or thirteen weeks and emphasized the importance of having an adult mentor for each confirmand.

We had to persuade the parents that confirmation was important enough to devote a significant block of time to. But our largest obstacle was identifying enough adults in the congregation whom we thought were ready to serve as mentors to the youth. How do you find the adults whom you are confident can really become the equippers, particularly when we have had impoverished Christian education for so long? We began to realize that we needed to do adult catechesis simultaneously. Perhaps part of the problem with youth losing interest in the church is precisely what Augustine was saying to the newly baptized: that confirmands look around and discover lazy Christians in their families and in the church. They wonder to themselves, "These adults don't seem to take it too seriously, why should I?"

Even so, we finally assembled enough adults to match with the youth. We encouraged the adults not only to attend the weekly confirmation classes with the young people, but also to spend time with them outside the classes. We encouraged them to talk together about Christian life, perhaps to engage in some Christian service together, and for the mentor to share something of his or her own journey of Christian faith. That would include sharing some of the joys, griefs, hopes, fears, and failures, not just saying, "Oh, the Christian life has just been one success after another," or, "Ever since I found Jesus, I've had just unending economic success." But rather to talk about some of the struggles, uncertainties, and frustrations. We encouraged this over several months so the youth were actually befriended by adults.

The adults who served as mentors were not directly connected with the youth program of the church. Some of them were afraid of whether they had anything sig-

nificant to say or whether they could relate. One of the people who served as a mentor was retired. It was wonderful to see the relationships that were formed.

There were also groups for the youth to participate in after they were confirmed: one for youth Bible study, modeled after the Disciple Bible Study sponsored by the United Methodist Church, and one modeled on the Wesleyan class meetings of covenant discipleship. We wanted them to be involved in Bible study. We also wanted them to be involved in learning what it would mean to become mentors to one another, to become mutual apprentices, to learn how to provide support and accountability to one another. We lost a couple of the kids right away, some of those bats in the bell tower. They didn't have much family support. We kept trying to reach them. However, it was great to see the willingness of these busy kids to restructure their schedules for the sake of these groups.

They discovered that something important was happening. I think they discovered that they were learning that Christian life may be as demanding and life-giving as learning to play baseball or to play the piano. It was the sense that they were becoming a part of a journey, of a drama, in which they had an important role to play, and some friendships began to be forged.

My appointment at Duke meant that we left this congregation sooner than we would have liked. But a year ago we got a call from one of the kids about whose trajectory I had great doubts. Much of my relationship with him involved his coming up behind me and hitting me on the head, or on the back, partly out of affection, partly as a request for attention, and partly just to be an irritable kid. It was complex. And yet the fact that he kept coming was important.

We had been gone from that congregation for two years. But that covenant discipleship group made up of several youth and of the mentor that we assigned to that guy had made a significant difference in keeping him going both at school and at church. He called because he wanted us to know that something good had happened to him, that he was proud. I hope we keep in touch over the years. I became convinced that he has already begun to discover what it means to find a sense of life in Christian community by developing the habits that can keep him going in the midst of a neighborhood that might otherwise tear him apart, in the midst of a world that might otherwise not reward him. He's not the best, the brightest, or the most talented young person. Even so, he's discovered a place where people offer him support and challenge, calling him to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. He has donned the apprentice's new clothes. If he can continue on that trajectory, then I believe, hope, and trust that he is not far from becoming the kind of person to whose care I would happily entrust someone else for mentoring along the wonderful life-giving journey of Christian discipleship. ▼▲

NOTES

- 1 This essay originated as a lecture delivered orally. I have sought to preserve the oral character of the lecture, and its informality, in this essay.
- 2 Hans Christian Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," in Michael Hague's *Favourite Hans Christian Andersen Fairy Tales* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1981), pp.106-112.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
11. C.S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World: 1964), p. 106.
12. Because of our decision to move to Duke, we did not stay at this congregation long enough to implement the program as fully as we had hoped. Even so, it had begun to make an important difference to our ministry and to the confirmation process.