



CHURCH of
the SAVIOUR

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“Grow in God”

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1 Timothy 4:7b-12 (NRSV)

1 Corinthians 13:11 (NRSV)

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I fell in love with church camp long before I was a camper. When I was a kid, my parents were involved in camping ministry for the East Ohio Conference. They both served as camp counselors at Camp Aldersgate in Carroll County, then later as deans of the camp for a week. My sister was three years ahead of me in school, so she got to go to camp before I did, which I wasn't happy about. But one year, when Dad was a counselor and Mom was in charge of crafts, they let me go along and stay with them in the lodge. It was like heaven to me. The faint musty smell of the lodge, the sound of kids' laughter and animated conversation, knowing that the waterfront was just down the hill with swimming and canoes and sailboats – the whole atmosphere was electric for a kid my age. I didn't get to do all the things the older kids did, but I was *there*. I “helped” Mom with crafts like making a name tag from a sawed-off disk of a tree branch and googly-eye pet rocks and Plaster of Paris molds. And their colleague Maxine had a camper parked near the lodge, which was always well-stocked with candy, and she treated me like an honored guest. It was the best week of the summer.

Eventually, I was old enough to attend camp for real. I got to stay in a cabin with the other kids, make s'mores around the campfire, sing and tell stories and paddle a canoe to the island just like everyone else. It was everything I hoped it would be (except for required quiet time every afternoon). I made new friends, discovered new interests and skills, and learned new songs that helped comprise my childhood soundtrack.

I also learned about faith through Bible stories and object lessons and the songs we sang around tables before and after meals each day. I learned about the wonder of God's creation, how the tiniest flower or rock bears the intricate markings of God's incredible design, things we usually pass right by without noticing. I learned what it means to love your neighbor through interactions with my family group and cabin mates, who were sometimes fun to pal around with and other times got on my last nerve (Jesus said to love 'em all). And the lessons I had learned at church about Jesus being both the Savior of the world and having a personal interest in me took on deeper meaning at morning watch and evening vespers and writing in my devotion journal and personal conversations with counselors who genuinely cared.

One of my clearest memories from camp is gathering on the back porch behind the dining hall to make ice cream. Everybody had to take a turn or else you didn't get to share in the ice cream (the Little Red Hen story was a staple). We were promised that the ice cream tasted better if you had a hand in making it. The strategic thinkers took their turn early, because the more the ice cream froze, the harder it became to turn the handle. Finally, after about 15-20 minutes, when the kids who thought they were the strongest had nearly strained their rotator cuffs, it was firm enough to eat. One of the adult leaders would carefully remove the crank, lift the canister and towel it off to remove any remaining chunks of rock salt, open the lid and pull out the paddles, using a rubber spatula to scrape the creamy goodness back into the canister with the rest. Then we would each get a few scoops in a melamine bowl to top with chocolate syrup and cookie bits. What they told us turned out to be true – it *did* taste better when you knew you had helped to make it and worked up an appetite turning the handle.

I was hooked. I went back year after year through my adolescence. Each year, we drove the family sedan over rolling hills and along the single lane through the FFA camp to the gravel parking lot, dragging my duffel and sleeping bag and pillow to the assigned cabin, choosing my bunk and meeting my counselors and cabin mates. Though much of camp was unchanged – the waterfront, the chapel in the woods, the sports court with its high fence to slow the loss rate of basketballs and volleyballs and dodgeballs to the wooded hillside – the themes and the content grew up with us. Instead of memorizing a single verse of scripture by setting it to a tune, we read longer passages and talked about what they meant. The simple object lessons gave way to increasingly complex questions – some we could answer and others we could not. And we began to be introduced to ideas like God's call for our lives, the challenges of being faithful in the face of peer pressure, and how our relationships reflect Christ living in us. We learned that every Christian at some point,

regardless of how they were brought up or how dramatic their experience, reaches a point of decision about whether to follow Jesus. For some, that moment of decision happened right there at camp, a moment we encouraged and celebrated together.

Looking back, it's obvious that the camping curriculum would change by age group. The development and needs of a fourth grader are completely different from those of an eighth grader. That wasn't as apparent to me at the time, nor did I fully appreciate the careful preparation and design of the camp leaders to make sure the camping experience was tailored to meet the campers where they were in their spiritual, physical, and mental development. To me, it was just camp, and it was fun. And it was impactful and meaningful for my life and for the lives of hundreds of other kids over the course of many summers.

"Train yourself in godliness," reads the First Letter to Timothy, "for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." Physical training *is* of some value. Church camp is filled with constant activity – swimming and hiking and running and playing games of all sorts. At camp, I learned archery and sailing and canoeing and how to build a fire. Those are helpful things to do and to know. But the things from camping that have stayed with me the most are the *spiritual* lessons – a deeper, more personal faith in Jesus and the connections with other kids seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus, too. That's not a knock against non-church camping experiences. I also went to basketball camp and band camp and spent much of my summer being active. Sports camps and scout camps and arts camps are all good things to do, helping to build physical health and shape relationships with nature and develop talents and expressions. But we can be hyper-focused on the physical and emotional while ignoring the spiritual, especially in the present climate of year-round sports and custom-built camping experiences. Physical training *is* of some value. But as the writer of the letter reminds us, "godliness is valuable in *every* way, holding promise for both the present life *and* the life to come." Growing in faith might not help you make the team next year, but those lessons will stay with you for life...and lead you to the life to come.

The lessons learned at camp have stuck with me over the years, and I know they have been formative experiences for many of you in your faith because you've told me. Isn't it fascinating how our childhood experiences can shape us in such profound ways throughout our lives? Just because those moments of faith connection occurred when we were young and relatively inexperienced doesn't mean that they impact us any less. *Take note, youth and current campers.* Don't let anyone minimize your experiences from camp or mission trip. Or, as the instructions to Timothy read, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young. Instead, set an example for the believers through your speech, behavior, love, and faith."

Now, imagine for a moment if we didn't do camping that way. What if the camp you loved in third or fourth grade was exactly the same every year? What if the stories were always told the same way, the songs were the same simple tunes, the conversations were at the same level as the first time you went? That camp wouldn't stay your favorite for very long. It would be like hanging out in the kiddie pool every time you went swimming or having to stick to the beginner course every time you used a kayak. Not only are those things no longer challenging once we've mastered them; they're not fun or interesting, either. Our experiences need to grow as our capacities grow.

The same thing is true when it comes to our faith. As we grow from children through adulthood, our intellect becomes sharper, our relationships become more textured, our lens of awareness becomes wider. We don't read the same books we read as kids, or watch the same shows, or have the same kind of conversations, or eat the same foods. So why is it that, when it comes to faith, so many of us are satisfied with the equivalent of a sixth-grade education? That may sound harsh, but if you stopped growing in your faith through small groups when you aged out of children's Sunday School, that's exactly what you're doing. *But I come to worship every week and listen to the sermon.* Nice try, but nothing doing. Worship is something we're all called to do as disciples, regardless of age. It's the first practice of faithful discipleship. Growing in faith is the *second* practice, and it's something we're also all called to do, regardless of age.

We call ourselves Children of God, which is what the Bible says we are. That's an assurance that we're part of God's family, like saying I'm Brad and Sue Call's child, or that you are each children of your own parents, and that's true regardless of how old you are. We *are* Children of God, but God doesn't want us to stay children. To be faithful to the kind of discipleship Jesus invites us to live, we have to *grow*, to become *mature* followers of Jesus. True, Jesus said that unless we become like children, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. But did he mean that we were to have a childlike understanding of the Bible, of God's action, of the grace we experience in Christ? Or did he mean that we need to have the same sense of wonder and curiosity and delight that children experience when we're in the presence of God?

“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child,” wrote the Apostle Paul in his great love chapter to the Corinthians. “(But) when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” One of the most important lessons we can learn from camp is that we have to grow in God as we grow in years in order for our faith to become what it is meant to be.

So, how do we do that? I am convinced that the single best way to grow in our faith is to participate in a small group. Make plans now to become part of a group this fall. A couple of great opportunities are already teed up for us. There’s *Disciple Fast Track*, a 24-week Bible study I’m teaching starting in September. We’re also bringing back Grouptober this October, a five-week dive into small group experience for everyone in the church. Or find an existing group whose schedule and pace works for you. I also encourage you to read the Bible on your own, at least a few verses every day. If you’re not sure where to start, pick up a daily devotional like *The Upper Room* or a similar resource. Or choose one of the Gospels to read (Mark is the simplest). You can find reading plans using YouVersion or Bible Gateway online. Whatever you choose, do *something*. God doesn’t want us to be satisfied hanging around the edges of our faith, picking up a little bit of Jesus here and there. God wants to draw us out of our comfortable conformity and cultural narcissism into a life shaped by the radical, counter-cultural, kingdom ethic of Jesus. We don’t get there by wading in the kiddie pool or building our lives on a decades-ago Sunday School faith, but by growing in God – every year, every week, every day.

Like that ice cream bucket, growing in God is a group activity. Everyone can get involved. And the faith we experience will be so much sweeter when we’ve put something of ourselves into it. You don’t have to be the strongest, turning the crank handle from beginning to end all by yourself. Just make a few turns and then a few more, and lean on the strength and the wisdom of the people around you. What’s important is that we all play our part and get there together.

It’s fine to be nostalgic about our childhood experiences. But let’s not rely on them to carry us through life. God wants to grow us up in our faith so we can become the people God imagined when God dreamed us up at the very beginning. Give it a go. Get involved. Grow in God. Amen.