

Parrots in the Church  
Hebrews 5:11-6:12  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
March 25, 2007  
Pastor Dave Carver

You're not surprised, I don't think, to hear me say that I spend a bit of time at the Aviary. It's a favorite place for me to go and think, read, pray, and yes, look at the birds. One of the hallways there is lined with large cages that are filled with parrots. Sometimes on a Thursday lunchtime, I'm the only visitor in that hallway, and I like to hear the birds crying out for attention, "Hello!" "Hi There!", or, in the days of Mickey the Crow, "So What?" If you want to get into an argument, ask a parrot owner if their bird can speak, or does it merely mimic sounds. Almost all of them would say, "Oh, no, she knows what she is saying!" Many scientists, however, would say otherwise. It is, as I have said, an interesting discussion. We will not have it here and now.

I think of those parrots sometimes when I'm with someone – often a child or young person – who says confidently, "You know, Pastor Dave, I can speak six languages." "Really! Which languages do you know?" And then my friend will count to ten in German, say "Konichiwa" in Japanese, or tell me in French that "le livre est sur la table" – the book is on the table.

I do this myself, you know. I've been to Malawi enough to baptize a baby in Chichewa, and do the benediction. But I can't claim to speak the language any more than my young friend speaks six languages. We're parroting the sounds we've heard, that's all. We're not fluent.

The preacher who brings us the message from the New Testament reading in Hebrews this morning has noticed the same thing in his congregation. He's got folks who are saying that they are Christians, but who are not really interested in growing in their faith. He wants to know what is going on with them. Just as the goal in language is not being able to count to ten, but to communicate in a variety of circumstances, so too the goal of our lives as Christians is to be more and more like Jesus.

In our reading for today, he asks them why it is that they've been hiding out in the infant room for so long. He says, "look, you've been doing nothing but eating graham crackers and drinking juiceboxes. No wonder you are stressed out now that some hard times have come your way. You're not strong. You have not practiced the faith that you have learned. It's time for you to grow up."

He stresses that they have learned and re-learned the basic aspects of the faith: trusting in God alone, claiming baptism, prayer, celebrating hope for resurrection, and remembering that there is a judgment. He commends them for having such solid and sound core beliefs.

But those core beliefs have to have some relevance to their real lives.

They have to lead to faithful practices. If the people in his congregation refuse to keep on growing in faith, then they are turning their backs on Christ, or, even worse, saying that his death on the cross is insignificant. People who act as if the crucifixion didn't matter are simply re-crucifying the Lord. But those who not only know the basics of the faith, but try to learn them and to use them in their daily lives will produce fruit – their lives, and the lives of the people around them, will be changed because of the faithful way that they are living Christ's truth.

And the preacher closes this section of Hebrews with a reminder and an exhortation: "Hang in there! You started so well! Don't give up or go back now! Of course it's hard – you're in a tight spot! But there is an end. There is a goal. There is a promise."

That is, I think, what the preacher is saying to his congregation in Hebrews 5 and 6. If he were preaching today, I think he might ask, "Why is the church here?" You can understand that to mean either "Why is the institution present in this community?" or "Why are the members of the congregation present at morning worship?" What is church for? Why did you come?

A certain segment of our population thinks that Church can be an important place for us to learn how to be nice to each other. We want our young people to learn something called "Judeo-Christian values". There's some sort of base level of culture that people can pick up here, and that's what these people are interested in. Church is for making nice. Church is where we learn to say "please" and "thank you"...and keep our kids away from sex and drugs.

Some folks live as if the purpose of church is to bring some sort of material gain – a "blessing" – to the worshippers. This can take several forms. In some places, there are people who find out what church the boss goes to and join that congregation, so that the boss can see them working hard on the Christian Education program or the Boy Scouts or whatever. When the boss sees how good I am and how devoted I am, it will be better for me at work. Other Christians believe that God intends for us to be materially wealthy, and if I'm faithful, then God will bless me with a new car, a fat bank account, or some other form of monetary advantage. For these people, showing up in church is an investment strategy.

Some people are in worship every Sunday because they've cut a deal with God. "Look, Lord, you get me out of this, and I'll go to church...If you bring my husband back, I'll be there every week...if you would only give us this baby, then...my mother won't speak to me, God, but if you change her, then I'll..." Do you know people like this? Have you been there yourself?

I'd like to suggest that the preacher to the Hebrews would say that these people understand Christianity about as well as an African Grey understands Shakespeare. They might be able to parrot some of the words, but they don't get the full depth of what it means to fall in love with Jesus and to live as his people. And if I'm right about that, then the churches in North America have a lot

of parrots in them.

All right, Reverend Smarty Pants, you tell us: Why is the church here?

Well, don't we come together to build on the basics of what we already know and believe so that we and the world around us are changed so that we become more in line with what God intends us and the world to be like? Isn't the point of church producing fruit that shows up as lives and worlds that are changed?

Here's an example from our own neighborhood. Think about the Open Door, and the biggest program there – Friday Night Recreation. It's a great program, and has run for the past twenty years. Why do we have that program?

Is the goal of Friday Night Rec to make sure that no one gets killed in that building between 6 and 10 on Fridays? Maybe it seems like that sometimes, but no, that's not why we have the program.

Does it exist to provide free babysitting to our neighbors? Again, I have a hunch that many might think this sometimes, but that's not the case.

Are we there to train up a new generation of professional dodge ball players? I mean, I've seen Eddie Gargis play. Can he make it in the "big leagues" of the National Dodgeball League – America's professional dodgeball society (I'm not making this up –they really do exist: the Wisconsin Ions, Minnesota Blur, and more...)? And if Eddie makes it to the "biggs", does that mean the Open Door has achieved its purpose?

Of course not. What is the purpose of the Open Door ministry? To change lives. I want to try something now. If your life has been changed by the ministry of the Open Door in the past twenty years, I want you to stand up. If the Open Door ministry has changed the life of someone that you love, I want you to stand up.

That's a lot of people.

So, if the purpose of the Open Door ministry is to change people's lives, then we're done, right? I mean, look at this room. Lots of folks standing up. Mission accomplished. Instead of planning a 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, we can close up shop, right? Lives have been touched...

Not so fast, Dave. There are more kids who need to be touched. Some of the people that we know don't even know the basics of faith. Others have the basics down, but they need practice in living them out. And, to tell you the truth, I'm not as much like Jesus as I think I should be. There's still room for me to grow.

Exactly!

Wherever we are in our walk in faith, our calling is to keep pressing more and more towards maturity. We rejoice that God lays a foundation in our lives, and that we can hold onto things like trusting in God alone, claiming baptism, prayer, celebrating hope for resurrection, and remembering that there is a judgment. But we have to practice living like those things are true. We have to build on what we have and grow into the places where we are not yet strong.

I love the aviary. I went there on Thursday right after I finished studying for this message. But the parrots need to stay there. We don't need any parrots in church. Remember, spiritual growth will not look the same in each of us, but each of us needs to be about the business of practicing the basics that we've received so that we'll be able to grow in our faith so that we'll be able to change the world so that others will know of the basics and they can practice those basics as they grow in their faith so that the world will be changed....

I think you get the point. Build on the basics. Reach for growth. Change the world. Because Jesus matters. Amen.