



# FROM THE PASTOR

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Deuteronomy 6: 4-9*

Jesus of Nazareth, all of his disciples, and the earliest “Christians” were Jewish. Then as Paul (and other apostles) started evangelizing among the Gentiles, a learning gap appeared. We know a lot of this from the New Testament writings, but the details of their catechesis or instruction in the faith is recorded in extra-scriptural letters and a document referred to as “The Didache” from the first century of the common era. From these documents, we know that *new converts* underwent three years of instruction before being baptized on Easter weekend.

The instruction they underwent was much more than what we would call religious education. They were expected to work with a catechist, who would have mentored them in the way of Jesus. Everyone would gather to worship in the evenings followed by a meal, but those that weren’t yet baptized would leave before the eucharistic liturgy. On the same day of their baptism,<sup>1</sup> they would then participate in the eucharist for the very first time. They would have been full and complete members of the body of Christ.

The Church has taken a long and winding road to the point we are now. Some things have gotten much better (i.e. the Roman Empire isn’t trying to martyr us!). Unfortunately, while many churches maintain the practice of a catechumenate, it has devolved into a series of classes that kids take so that they can “graduate” out of Sunday School. While they may be well-educated in the religion, very few seem to have matured in their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars are conflicted, but in most churches practicing infant baptism, it is believed that this would have been an entire family affair meaning that an entire household would be baptized together and the entire family would then take communion together.

I know that many people bemoan the state of the church today. Many of us know more people that have abandoned church than people who are still engaged. It's easy to point fingers at parents, pastors, boring worship, lost traditions etc. Some people are sure it's because things aren't like they used to be when they were kids (or raising kids). Others think we haven't progressed enough with the times to be relevant to the people of today. Those things might be true, but I think they are symptoms of a problem not the cause.

I've been to churches in ramshackle buildings that can't afford a full-time pastor, but are thriving spiritually in neighborhoods that know who they are and what they do. I've also been to churches packed with people and multiple clergy, who are barely identifiable as Christian. The true indication of a healthy church isn't numbers – money or people – it's in the faith formation of the people choosing to be there. Religious education matters, but only if it is combined with worship and community engagement.

Church was never meant to be an educational institution, social club, or service project. Church was meant to be a *community of people* dedicating their lives to following the way of Christ. Being Christian is a complete lifestyle not just another activity added to an already busy life. As the passage above indicates, we are walking with God, when we keep God's words in our hearts at church and throughout every area of our lives.

An effective church is one in which the people worship, study scripture, pray, and break bread together. A healthy congregation is one in which we listen to one another and care for one another. A thriving church is one that is well-known in the neighborhood for following Christ.

I'm excited about this coming fall. We are starting a new Sunday School program for kids that is geared toward faith formation. It isn't about teaching the kids bible stories. It is about helping them to see themselves in the stories – recognizing that the stories are about them. We also will be providing an adult bible study that pairs with the confirmation class, so parents *and others* have another tool to mentor our young people into adulthood in the church.

I am full of hope for our church, because I see so many of you living out your faith in many ways. On the one hand, we look at the world around us and think it is so very different from the early church, but the need for God and a loving community with which to practice our faith has remained the same.

