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Dear Friends,

If only maturity, wisdom, and improved judgment came automatically with growing older... But alas, just because we grow older and have more experience, it does not follow that we become more wise or more mature.

Growing up well requires paying attention, having good examples to follow, solid goals to aim for, some standards by which we measure our progress along the way, and some occasional correction and redirection. We would not think much of a teacher, coach, mentor, or supervisor who never corrected us or helped us to understand what we were doing wrong. Just because we are old enough to be adults, it does not follow that we act like mature people.

I think we all have some intuitive sense of what it means to be mature—or at least what mature behavior looks like—but how we get there is perhaps still something of a mystery.

Back in January, Debbie Jancek and Mike Wunder selected for their wedding the (justifiably) famous reading from the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians—the passage in which he offers a mature, and not uncomplicated, understanding of love. As part of that reflection, St. Paul comments that when he was a child, he spoke, thought, and acted like a child, but when he became an adult, he put away childish ways. A few Sundays later, we had that same reading appointed as our regular Sunday morning Epistle lesson.

If we were to be more specific about the “childish ways” to which Paul refers, what would we put on our list? And if we do not make the transition from the childish life to the adult life automatically, by what means do we make that change?

**Childish ways** Children, by their nature, seem often to put their own needs and desires at the center of their life. Learning to share is an early goal, and even then it is often taught from the perspective of self-interest: if you share with others, they will share with you; if you share, I will give you something you desire (praise, a reward, or an indication that I hold you in higher regard). The

self-centered person of any age tends to view others primarily as resources for meeting their own needs.

**A rabbi and a traveler meet in a bar....**This past summer I attended a presentation by a visiting rabbi at Temple Israel on Grove Street in Ridgewood on the subject of compassion in the spiritual life. The speaker told the story of a rabbi traveling back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through central Europe. It was the middle of the winter and he stopped for the night in a village inn. All the guests ate together at a long table in the central room, and this rabbi noticed the particular gusto with which his neighbor was addressing the roast chicken set before him. To make conversation the rabbi observed, "You are enjoying your meal." "Yes," his neighbor replied between mouthfuls, "I just *love* this chicken." "You love it?" the rabbi asked. "Yes," his neighbor replied, "this is the best chicken I have ever had. I just *love* it." The rabbi thought for a moment and then observed, "I am not sure that you love the chicken. I think perhaps you love what the chicken does for you, and that might not be the same thing."

The childish sensibility within us can confuse the delight we take in what a person does for us with love for them. The maturity to which Paul invites us is to view love not as a source of powerful pleasure, but as a means to create a different kind of self, a different kind of life, and a different kind of world.

Imagine being a person who, by nature, did not seek the gratification of a personal agenda, but who genuinely sought the good of the other—not just in our families, our communities, our nation, ethnic group, or class, and not just looking to the behavior of the other to reinforce our sense of being good or generous or wise ourselves, but genuinely seeking their good.

**Motive, means, and opportunity** We can be quite canny about using others to meet our needs while seeming to be focused on them. My sense is we are more likely to deceive ourselves in these encounters than to deceive anyone else. When we give expecting a corresponding gift in return, or a sense of gratitude, or an acknowledgment of our generosity, or even an unspoken inner sense of satisfaction or pride, we are giving to ourselves, not to anyone or anything else.

Jesus addresses the question of the motives, the objects, and the results of our actions directly in the Gospel appointed for every Ash Wednesday from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21). In that passage Jesus cautions his audience that if they perform various religious acts for the sake of appearing to others to be religious people, then they may be successfully engaging in ego-stroking, self-promotion, and public relations, but they are doing nothing positive for their relationship with God. In our worship and religious practices, if our attention is directed to anything other than God, then we are not engaging God.

And, of course, it is tempting—and remarkably easy—to think that naturally what I want is what God wants, an intellectual posture which adds moral self-righteousness to personal appetite. Too often to be an adult is to become adept at putting God's name on our agenda and then to present our belief or desire as if it were God's intent and plan. And the even greater danger is when we become so accustomed to blurring the boundary between God's will and our own that we cease even to be aware that there is a boundary there at all. When we do not give up childish ways, but grow experienced and wise in pursuing them, we can rationalize a remarkable amount of self-serving behavior in the name of virtue and the greater good.

**Hiring God** It is possible to become so confident that we and God think the same way, that when we fail to get something that we desire, we can become quite indignant that God would not provide it for us. It is as though God has broken "his" side of the bargain: "How could God let this

happen/do this to me/do this to someone I love?” Part of the pain in that situation is the awareness, often not even conscious, that our will and the will of God, what makes sense to us and what God either does or permits, are not one and the same.

For Episcopalians the traditional way to discern the will of God is to seek it in scripture (the Old and New Testaments); to use our God-given reason to understand scripture, which is a complex and nuanced collection of a wide variety of literary genres from many times, places, and cultures; and to consider how other Christians in other times and places have made sense of scripture, in the hope that consulting those other voices will counterbalance the prejudices, blind spots, and unquestioned assumptions which everyone inevitably absorbs from their culture. In its abbreviated form, this methodology is known as relying on scripture, reason, and tradition, but it is important to understand that reason and tradition are tools to illuminate our engagement with scripture, and are not separate, equal authorities.

**To see the Father—and the Mother—for themselves** A child tends to view a parent as the one whose role is to meet the child’s needs. And, for a child, such a view is entirely understandable and appropriate. But to reverse that equation is just the opposite of appropriate.

I suspect we have a consensus that for an adult to use a child to gratify the adult’s desires, or needs, is at best inappropriate and, at worst, well, much worse. That we are so much clearer about the physical parameters of these matters than we are about the emotional or even spiritual is both worth noting and worthy of further consideration. Looking to children to give us a sense of purpose may place a burden on them they should not have to bear and may distract us from our ability to relate to them in a way best suited to their growth and development. The issue of how parents and children ought to best relate to one another is a recurring theme in the Bible, and especially in the Book of Genesis, a book in which family relationships and dynamics are never far from the main narrative.

**Our parents and our God** One sign of psychological maturity is an awareness that parents have an identity, and a purpose, apart from their relationship to oneself as a child. To grow up emotionally—to put away childish things with respect to one’s image of one’s parents—is to see them as individuals and not simply as people filling a role with respect to the observer.

A sign of spiritual maturity is the ability to see God not as one who meets our needs, but as someone who has an identity, a mind, and a will apart from our own. Deciding what we think is good or right, and then imputing that position to God, is an error which is tempting and dangerous in equal measure. The paradox for Christians is that we believe that it is God’s will to do for us and those we love “better things than we can desire or pray for (BCP, p. 821)” and that it is God’s nature “to give more than either we desire or deserve (BCP, p. 182).”<sup>1</sup> The underlying assumption in both of those prayers is that God knows better than we do what is good and right.

To put away childish things in our relationship with God is to give up the image of God as the guarantor of what we would choose, and to seek first to know, and then to follow, God’s will for us. To seek to enlist God to do our bidding, as if we were hiring an especially gifted and powerful staff person, sounds ludicrous, but may describe our functional relationship with God more accurately than we would care to acknowledge, even to ourselves.

To put away childish things is to seek God first. There is certainly a place for the other good things of our lives—our families, our work, our contribution to the welfare of our communities, our creative abilities, our abilities to assist and delight others. But that place is not at the center of our

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<sup>1</sup> BCP = *The Book of Common Prayer*

lives: and because those areas by their very nature cannot sustain us, if we look to them for that sort of meaning and support, we will distort and damage relationships which otherwise could thrive and nurture us. Making family, work, or security our central focus will make it impossible to have healthy relationships with family, work, or security—not because they are bad or because we are, but simply because they lack the ability to provide what we most need. That displaced allegiance and dependence is our modern version of the idolatry denounced throughout the scriptures—idolatry is putting anything which is not God in God’s place, and the thing can be a person, a relationship, or a career goal just as much as a carved piece of wood or cast figure of gold.

**The security blanket** It is not uncommon for a child to invest a toy, a doll, a blanket, or some other small object with an imagined power to confer security. As adults we tend to tolerate this practice knowing that a time will come when the child will outgrow this dependent attachment. Part of putting away childish things in our spiritual lives is to ask what we have made into our “security blanket” in place of God, and to ask what our thinking becomes, and what our lives look like, when we believe, as we often profess, that “our help is in the name of the Lord (BCP p. 127).”

When St. Paul invites us to put away childish things, it is for the sake of offering us a better life—a better life for ourselves, for those we love, and for our local and larger communities. The choice he places before us is not a morally neutral decision between two equally meretricious options. Our culture tends to place religious choices in that category—fine for those who choose, but really of no consequence if you decide it’s not for you.

For Paul, the question is, Do we want to live and contribute as adults, and help make a community guided by adult wisdom and insights? Or, Do we want to be self-serving and me (and my family)-first, and live in a community in which that selfish, egocentric narcissism is the dominant organizing principle? Can we learn to love as God loves, or is the best we can hope for is that we will be people who love as the chicken-eating diner in the rabbi’s story does?

**Giving up something in Lent** We are well into Lent, but it is not too late to think about giving something up. What if what you chose to give up this Lent was “childish ways”? We gather each week, and often in between, to explore what it means to put away childish things, to support one another in our efforts to become mature people, to acknowledge that none of us gets it right all the time, and to seek guidance and support from God in scripture, prayer, reflection, and fellowship as we continue on this project. St. Paul calls this path the more excellent way. May we walk it together now and ever hereafter.

The Rev. Canon John G. Hartnett  
Rector

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