

Is Your Faith Freezer Burned?
II Timothy 3: 14-4:4
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First Federated Church
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Is your faith “freezer burned?”

While cleaning out the freezer at home one day I discovered a package of meat that had worked its way to the very bottom. It was ice-covered and as hard as any rock. I wiped off the ice and discovered that the meat was hamburger. The discoloration indicated that it was “freezer burned.”

Now, freezer burned meat is not bad for you. You can still eat it. It just won't look or taste quite right. It has a cardboard quality to it. Freezer burn occurs when something has been improperly stored and air molecules interact with the food forming ice crystals which in turn break down the texture and flavor of the thing burned.

Many adults have what I refer to as a freezer burned faith. By that I mean that when they were younger they were active in church. They may have even gone through what we call “confirmation” but then they simply quit learning, quit growing. They buried this “confirmation-size” faith in the life's freezer and forget about it. They simply quit growing in the faith. I think that this happens because we adults, by our lack of involvement in meaningful Christian Education are unintentionally teaching our children that someday, they too can outgrow Sunday School or Christian Education.

The problem with a freezer burned faith is that when it comes time for us to take it out of the freezer and apply it to some serious aspect of our lives—an illness, a death, a terrible disappointment, a broken relationship—we find that the faith that we always thought would be there for us, doesn't

“taste the same.” It has grown discolored and stale. It is lacking in real nourishment.

Although he didn't use the same phrase, years ago a minister named J.B. Phillips wrote about a freezer burned faith. In his introduction to the book Your God Is Too Small, Phillips wrote:

It is obviously impossible for an adult to worship the conception of God that exists in the mind of a child of Sunday-school age, unless he is prepared to deny his own experience of life. If, by a great effort of will, he does do this he will always be secretly afraid lest some new truth may expose the juvenility of his faith. ...

Many men and women today are living, often with inner dissatisfaction, without any faith in God at all. This is not because they are particularly wicked or selfish or, as the old-fashioned would say, “godless,” but because they have not found with their adult minds a God big enough to “account for” life. (pgs. 7,8 c. 1976, Macmillan Publishing Company)

Typically, a freezer burned faith has several misconceptions about God. For example, it may view God as, what I call, “the **Great Moral Accountant in the Sky**” who keeps a careful ledger book of everything that we do, right and wrong; debits and credits. At the end of life God tallies up the ledger, and if your “good” marks outnumber your “bad” marks, you're in. If not, you're out!

This understanding of God is simple to understand and seems fair on the surface but it is based on one's sense of right and wrong, one's moral conscience. But as C. Ellis Nelson noted in his little book, Don't Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide, our conscience is culturally conditioned. For example, if one was raised in a vegetarian household their conscience may bother them terribly if they eat meat. The same is true of a hunter who was

taught since youth that it is not sporting to shoot a “sitting bird.” If he or she does shoot a sitting bird, they think that they have done something terribly wrong.

Propaganda is a successful instrument to shape an individual’s conscience, to pervert one’s sense of right and wrong.

Another “too small view” about God is to see the Almighty as a Grandfatherly figure in the sky, sitting in a rocking chair and looking down benevolently or wrathfully upon everything that is happening on earth below. This is an uninvolved God, a God who may have been relevant at one time but no longer so.

Then there is the misconception that sees God revealed in Jesus Christ as “meek and mild.” As the childhood poem taught generations of children,

*Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon this little child.
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as He.*

This picture of God is of someone who allows sleeping dogs to lie, avoids trouble whenever possible, as someone who is uninspired and uninspiring. It definitely does not take into account the Jesus who cleansed the Jerusalem Temple with a whip because the faith had become corrupted by greed, pride and abuse. This picture of God and of Christianity leaves many with the idea that the faith is a soft and sentimental thing that has nothing to say to real world.

And then there is what I call “**the God in the Gaps.**” This gives us “the incredibly shrinking God,” a God who shrinks as human understanding of the universe expands. This god becomes the god who fills in the gaps of

our understanding of the world around us. Science is where we really place our faith and human understanding is center stage.

Of course there are a host of other misconceptions about God, but this gives you a sense of spiritual freezer burn.

In our epistle lesson today an aging apostle Paul writes from a Roman prison cell to his young friend and *mentoree* Timothy. He encourages Timothy to

...continue in what you have learned and firmly believed...Remember from what sort of people your knowledge has come, and how from early childhood your mind has been familiar with the Holy Scriptures, which can open the mind to the salvation which comes through believing in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching the faith and correcting error, for resetting the direction of a person's life and training them in good living. The scriptures are the comprehensive equipment of people called by God, and they fit each individual fully for all branches of their work. (TNIV and JB Phillips)

He goes on to say that the day is coming when people will have “itchy ears” and not want to listen to sound teachings. Paul encourages Timothy not to become disheartened by the “itchy ears” of people. He is to stay on message.

You see scripture is not a repository of facts to be learned. In the temptation stories of Jesus we are reminded the even the devil can quote scripture. We are not to be mindless robots but lovers of Jesus Christ, faithful disciples in a culture that offers up one panacea after another, each promising a better life, holding out the prospect of satisfying the deeper hunger of our hearts for God with a new religion or a new drug.

Charles Hadden Spurgeon, a renowned preacher of an earlier era, once spoke about watching a squirrel running in a large beech tree. The squirrel ran among the branches, leaping from one to the other, playing in every nook and cranny of the great tree. The squirrel moved among the branches as if the trunk were some kind of “Main Street” and the smaller branches country lanes and alleys. Somewhere among the branches Spurgeon surmised the squirrel made his nest and stashed his food.

As Spurgeon reflected upon the squirrel he saw an analogy to our relationship with Scripture. He wrote:

“...the way to deal with God’s word is not merely to contemplate it, or study it, as a student does; but to live on it, as that squirrel lives on his beech tree. Let it be to you, spiritually, your house, your home, your food, your medicine, your clothing, the one essential element of your soul’s life and growth.”

If we are to avoid a “freezer burned” faith we must make a conscious effort to be engaged in reflecting upon God’s word, not only individually, but within the context of the faith community. It was the ancient so-called “Church Father” Jerome who once described the Bible as a lake upon which a person may choose to stay on the surface or explore the infinite depths of truth contained within it.

This month’s Big Idea is “Disciples *Learn*.” Christian Education isn’t just for children. It is for everyone of every age. It is the only way to avoid spiritual freezer burn. Amen.