

**“A faith for each new generation”, a sermon based on Luke 12:49-56, preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 14 August 2016**

Dorothy Soelle was a German theologian whose theology was said by some to be too unorthodox for Germany so she taught in New York. Dorothy was not your straight up and down, conventional Christian. Yet, despite all her questions and struggles with the church, she longed for her children to have faith.

She wrote a letter to them about what really counts in life. She wanted to tell them what had comforted and sustained her. She wanted to tell them what not to forget or lose.

She retold a fairy tale she had told her children when they were young. It was about a poor shepherd who is led to a magical, mysterious mountain by a small, old man. Upon arriving at the mountain, it bursts wide open to reveal a vast pile of riches and treasures. The shepherd wastes no time. He goes inside the mountain and begins to stuff his pockets with gold and jewels. As he is doing this, he hears a voice call out, “Don’t forget the best!” Suddenly, the mountain closes back up and all the treasures in the shepherd’s pocket turn to dust. With that, the story ends.

It is an enigmatic story. We don’t know what exactly “the best” is. Is it a particular treasure? Is it a reference to what really matters in life—something other than treasures? Soelle doesn’t know. What she does know is that “the best” is precisely what she wants to leave with her four children. Her struggle, however, is that for her “the best” is not something that can simply be handed over. It is not as easy as giving them a box with the family jewels inside. Soelle says that what she would most like to pass along is this: “To love God with the whole heart, with all one’s strength, from one’s entire soul.”

Soelle said that her efforts at raising her children in the Christian faith “had little chance of succeeding.” She confesses she herself did not live a devout life of daily song and prayer. Despite this, Soelle wishes for her children to become “a little bit pious.” “Don’t forget the best,” she says.

She doesn't expect her children to praise God without ceasing like some holy roller. She simply hopes that they praise God occasionally. She simply hopes that every now and then gratitude rises out of them, every now and then they sing "hallelujah," or let their thanks become expressed in some way.

Soelle remembers how she and her husband would take their children on trips when they were young. The children would often get dragged into churches. On one occasion, they were forced to enter a church that Soelle herself confessed to be awful. She recalls one of her children dryly announcing, "No God in there." Soelle says this is precisely what she did not want ever to be said about the lives of her children. She declares, "God is to be 'in there,' at the sea and in the clouds, in the candle, in music, and, of course, in love."

Ultimately, what Soelle wants her children to have is the joy of faith. She explains that the joy she has in mind is the kind that comes without a "why." There is no explanation for the source of this joy. Its origin is a mystery. As Meister Eckhart said, it is "utterly devoid of why." This is the joy that Soelle wants to leave with her children. She would be content to sit among riches and treasures as she calls out, "Don't forget the best!" Amen.

Soelle expresses the longing in many of our hearts for our children.

Amid all we might wish for them – a decent job, a thoughtful education, healthy relationships, a sense of justice and peace, care of creation, there is one other thing we most want for them – Don't forget the best.

Why do we imagine faith is the best?

Faith is about eternal life, life lived at depth, life given to wonder and gratitude, life that sacrifices itself for others, life for a world of justice and peace, life that seeks truth, life that reaches to people who are poor and afraid, life that resists evil even when it is safer to keep quiet, life that asks questions and explores doubts and keeps exploring.

Faith is life with Jesus, living with Jesus, who greets us each day with possibilities for God's new world, who accompanies us each day and orients us to God's new world, who opens our eyes and our hearts and our ears to each other, to the other, who keeps questioning us and who we are and who we stand with, and who at the end of each day, and at the end of life, closes our eyes in love.

What do we want for our children and grandchildren, our nephews and nieces, the young ones for whom we pray?

"To love God with the whole heart, with all one's strength, from one's entire soul."

But faith does not have grandchildren. We can give our children kindling, but we cannot light the fire. The spark for the fire must come within them, within each person. Their own fire must burn.

And what a challenge that is, because New Zealand society in particular is keen to douse the fire.

Yes, many people are asking spiritual questions in our society. We see signs of openness to faith, interest in spirit, awareness of deeper life. Yet, people who turn to faith in Jesus find that it costs them. People who apply for jobs and disclose they are religious may be less likely to get work.

Young people who take their faith seriously can be regarded as strange.

Grandparents who want their grandchildren to have faith are regarded as old-fashioned.

In many parts of our society, faith is treated with cynicism and snide remarks. So when the spark of faith evolves into fire, people are making a costly step, not a natural transition. Young people find that when faith becomes real to them, they have to withstand the judgement of others. Young people who decide to follow Christ, are shifting allegiances with a price. They are choosing to live a particular way. Faith is less like a hobby, less discretionary, less an add-on, less optional.

Jesus words today make sense in such a context.

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! <sup>52</sup>From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; <sup>53</sup>they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

For many of us, this is what happened and what happens, that there is an element of division. It can be the hardest thing with which we have to deal. It does not mean we leave our family. It does not mean we love them less or they love us less. It does mean we may have to live with them less openly, less freely, less passionately, perhaps more carefully, because they do not share with us the deep fire that burns within, that determines what we do and how we do it, that we cannot share with them, at our deepest level, the greatest thing in our life.

Through September I am offering people the opportunity to explore what it means to profess their faith before the congregation. It is sometimes called confirmation. You can read about it in the notices. It is an opportunity, in the journey of faith to say, despite all our questions, I want to stand somewhere. I am not going to keep living according to whichever way the wind blows. I want to stand with Jesus. I want the people of Jesus to be my people.

And next Sunday, we all have the opportunity, in this inhospitable world, to encourage young people as they lead our worship. To say to them by our presence – “Don’t forget the best!”

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