

Spiritual Maturity: Am I Growing up in Faith?

I have no idea if anyone really pays attention to my sermon titles and then sees if they actually make sense with what the sermon is about. But I feel like I need to start with a disclaimer...as I was writing this sermon, I knew where I was headed, but then as I began to write my way there, I realized I had too much to say in one sermon. So today is going to be part 1. "Which I'm going to title "Spiritual Maturity: Am I Growing up in Faith? And next week we will get to where I originally thought I was headed: The Way up is the Way Down.

I. What is Spiritual Maturity?

For the last several weeks, we've been talking about journeys that involve actually going somewhere. Last week we talked about migration, about people leaving one place and making a home in another. We've talked about exile—what happens when you lose the power to decide where home will be.

But not every journey involves moving from one physical place to another.

There are journeys that happen within us.

The way we understand ourselves changes.

The way we understand the world changes.

And, if we're paying attention, the way we understand God changes too.

So today I want us to come back to the idea of the spiritual journey—the ways that faith itself grows and changes over the course of a life.

And maybe another way to ask that is: **What does it actually mean to mature spiritually?**

Because spiritual maturity and chronological maturity are not the same thing. You can grow older without necessarily growing spiritually. You can know a tremendous amount about Christianity and still not be particularly transformed by it.

You can know the Bible. You can know the hymns. You can know the creeds. You can go to church for sixty years and still approach faith primarily as a set of rules to follow, answers to defend, boundaries to protect, and a way of knowing who's right and who's wrong.

So perhaps spiritual maturity isn't primarily about how much we know. Maybe it has something to do with how our way of seeing changes.

How do I understand God?

How do I understand myself?

How do I understand people who are different from me?

How do I respond when life doesn't fit neatly into the categories I've been given?

Those are questions of spiritual maturity.

We already understand this idea of development in almost every other part of life. Think about children. Every well check you get a packet to fill out to track their developmental milestones.

Can they hold their head up? Can they sit? Can they walk?

It's fascinating even to watch how children's play develop. At one point, two toddlers can sit right beside each other, each completely absorbed in their own thing. We call that parallel play. Eventually they develop the capacity to actually play with another child. Later that becomes more elaborate imaginative play—they can take on roles and imagine themselves as someone else. Which is the stage we are in the middle of at our house. So if you ever would like to pretend to be a student in Saige's class, or a patient at Maya's doctors office...I'm taking volunteers.

When kids play this way, something has changed in them. They haven't simply learned more information. They have developed capacities they didn't have before.

As they get older, we begin paying attention to other kinds of development.

Can they understand another person's perspective?

Can they regulate their emotions?

Can they think abstractly?

We pay attention to these things because development isn't simply about getting bigger or accumulating more information. As we develop, we become capable of seeing and engaging the world in ways we couldn't before.

Eventually psychologists began asking whether that same kind of development happens internally too.

How does the way we make decisions develop?

How does our understanding of right and wrong develop?

Does our capacity for faith develop?

II. Our Inner Lives Develop Too

I remember learning about this when I was in seminary. We were studying Kohlberg stages of moral development, and for one assignment we had to interview a few people. We were given a moral dilemma to present to them, and then we were supposed to listen carefully to their response and think about what it revealed about the way they reasoned morally.

I interviewed my aunt, mainly because my aunt and I think VERY differently about a whole lot of things. So I was fascinated by the opportunity to figure out not just what she thought, but maybe something about how she thought, perhaps in a low stakes, less heated kind of way.

The dilemma went something like this: There was a woman who was very sick and was going to die. There was a medication that could save her life, but she and her husband couldn't afford it. Her husband tried everything he could think of to get the medication, but nothing worked.

And so he was faced with a choice:

Should he steal the medication to save his wife's life?

The interesting part wasn't simply the yes or no.

The researchers were interested in the why behind the answer, because two people can give exactly the same answer and arrive there through completely different kinds of moral reasoning.

A young child might say, "Of course he shouldn't steal it. Stealing is wrong. He could get in trouble." The primary moral concern is punishment.

As we develop, the reasoning can become more about rules and social order: “No, he shouldn’t steal it. We have laws for a reason. If everyone just decided which laws they wanted to follow, society wouldn’t work.”

But eventually someone might begin asking a different kind of question: What happens when two things I believe are right, come into conflict? Stealing is wrong. But allowing another human being to die when you could save them also seems wrong. So which value carries more weight? Is obeying the law always the same thing as doing what is right? Are there circumstances in which a law itself could be unjust?

Suddenly, morality requires more than knowing the rule. It requires the capacity to wrestle with competing values, context, justice, human dignity, and the consequences of our choices.

That was one of the insights of developmental psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. He proposed that our moral reasoning can develop. And here’s the part I find fascinating:

Getting older doesn’t guarantee that it will.

We don’t automatically wake up at a certain age with a more complex moral framework. An adult can still approach morality primarily through punishment and reward. An adult can still need everything to be divided neatly into right and wrong, good and bad.

Chronological maturity and moral maturity are not necessarily the same thing.

And eventually researchers began asking a similar question about faith.

Does faith develop too?

One of the best-known people to explore that question was James Fowler, a theologian and research of faith development. He wasn’t primarily interested in determining whether their theology was correct. He was interested in how people made meaning.

How do we understand God? How do we understand ourselves? Where does authority come from? How do we decide what is true? How do we understand people whose beliefs are different from our own?

Fowler proposed that faith develops in stages too. When we're young, faith is largely something we receive. Someone tells us the stories. Someone teaches us who God is. Someone tells us what is right and wrong. Someone gives us a community in which we belong.

Eventually all of those things form a framework through which we understand the world: This is what we believe. This is what the Bible says. This is what good people do. These are our people. This is right. This is wrong.

And there is nothing inherently bad about that kind of faith. In fact, we need it. It gives us identity and belonging. It gives us a story. It gives us a framework for making sense of an enormously complicated world.

But Fowler noticed something else.

Some people remain there for their entire lives.

Because spiritual development isn't automatic either. You can be seventy years old and still need faith to give you absolute answers. You can have spent your entire life in church and still be deeply threatened by someone who sees God differently than you do. You can know a tremendous amount about the Bible without developing the capacity to wrestle with complexity, mystery, or ambiguity.

And for some people, eventually something happens that challenges the framework they've been given.

Maybe we learn something that doesn't fit what we were taught.

Maybe the church disappoints us.

Maybe something happens in our lives for which the easy theological answer suddenly feels terribly inadequate.

And we begin asking questions we weren't asking before. Why do I believe what I believe? Do I believe this because I have actually come to believe it—or because this is what I was taught? What happens when my experience doesn't fit neatly into the categories I've been given? What happens when something I was absolutely certain about becomes less certain?

From the outside, that can look like someone is losing their faith.

They have more questions than they used to. They're less certain. They may no longer believe something they once believed. They may begin questioning things their religious community considers settled. And our instinct can be to get them back to certainty as quickly as possible.

But Fowler offers another possibility:

What looks like the loss of faith may sometimes be the development of faith.

Because on the other side of that questioning is the possibility of a faith with a greater capacity for complexity. A faith that can hold conviction and humility together. A faith that can encounter mystery without immediately needing to explain it. A faith that can say, "I don't know," without feeling threatened. A faith that can recognize truth outside of its own boundaries. A faith increasingly concerned not simply with protecting my beliefs or my group, but with love, justice, compassion, and the wellbeing of others.

Now, Fowler's theory is much more complicated than what I'm describing. He identified six stages, and his work has been critiqued and refined over the years. But I don't actually need us to remember six stages this morning.

I want us to sit with the larger idea:

Faith can develop.

And spiritual maturity isn't guaranteed by getting older. It isn't guaranteed by going to church. It isn't even guaranteed by knowing a lot about Christianity. The question is whether we are willing to allow our faith to transform us.

So how do we know?

How do we know whether our faith is actually maturing?

Because if it's not simply about how old we are, how long we've been going to church, or how much we know about the Bible, then what are we looking for?

Interestingly enough, when Paul talks about life in the Spirit, he doesn't give us a theological exam.

He talks about fruit.

"The fruit of the Spirit," Paul writes in Galatians, "is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

You don't stand beside an apple tree and ask how much the tree knows about being an apple tree.

You look at what it produces.

And perhaps we should ask something similar about our faith.

What is it producing?

Is my faith making me more loving?

More patient?

More generous?

More gentle?

Is it making me more capable of listening to someone whose experience is different from mine?

Am I becoming less threatened by questions I cannot answer?

Can I hold a deep conviction without needing to demonize someone who holds a different one?

Can I discover that I was wrong about something and allow that discovery to change me?

Can I say, “I don’t know,” and still trust God?

Those seem to me like questions of spiritual maturity.

And this is where I think we have to be careful, because it is entirely possible to confuse certainty with maturity.

We can assume that the person with the strongest answer has the strongest faith. That the person who knows exactly what the Bible says about everything must be spiritually mature. That having fewer questions means having more faith.

But I’m not sure that’s what we see in Scripture.

Some of the people Jesus has the most difficulty with are people who are extraordinarily certain.

They know the law.

They know the religious tradition.

They know who is clean and who is unclean.

They know who belongs and who doesn’t.

And then Jesus keeps showing up and complicating their categories.

—So now I want to ask all of you....

Think back to the faith you had ten or twenty years ago. What is something about God, faith, or the world that you see differently now?

Who or what has most changed the way you understand God?

So if spiritual maturity isn't simply about gaining more knowledge, then how does transformation actually happen?

How do we become more capable of humility? More able to live with mystery? More compassionate toward people who are different from us? Less dependent upon certainty and control?

And this is where things get uncomfortable.

Because we would like to become wiser without ever discovering that we were wrong.

We would like deeper faith without having our certainty disrupted.

We would like to become more compassionate without having our categories challenged.

We would like transformation without having to let go of anything.

But that doesn't seem to be how spiritual transformation works.

Richard Rohr describes the journey with three simple words:

Order. Disorder. Reorder.

And we'll spend more time with those movements next week. Because perhaps the way down is the way up.

But for today, perhaps the question to leave with is not simply, What do I believe? But
Has my faith actually matured as I have? How do I know if my faith is actually maturing?
Has my faith made me more certain—or more capable of love?