

Last week we talked about the stages of moral development and of faith development. And we acknowledged that faith can mature.

But I also don't want you to think that spiritual formation is simply linear, or that it is about climbing a ladder toward more knowledge, more insight, more sophistication, more advanced theology.

Today the question we are wrestling with is: How does spiritual growth actually happen? What moves us along that journey?

Well I have to tell you it is: usually not by simply adding more information.

With school kicking back into gear, my timeline has been filled with people's first-day-of-school pictures, and it got me thinking back on school, and college. You know those first days where you get the syllabus for each class? Anybody else out there love a good syllabus?

Why do you love a good syllabus?

Because it tells you exactly what is expected.

Here are the assignments. Here are the deadlines. Here is how the grade is calculated.

And if you were somebody like me, who was a high achiever and trying to get good grades, the syllabus was beautiful because it gave you the path.

Do these things. Earn these points. Get this grade.

And school, at least in large part, is built around that kind of growth. You gain knowledge. You learn information. You demonstrate that you understand it.

But mastering knowledge only gets you so far.

Now Playing soccer taught me that growth is more complicated than that. You could know every rule and understand every strategy and still not be able to make the pass. Knowing the game and becoming a player are different things.

Faith is like that too.

Knowledge matters. Study matters. Scripture matters. Theology matters. But you can spend your whole life accumulating information about God without necessarily being transformed by God.

Information changes what we know. Transformation changes how we are.

You can know that forgiveness matters and still be unable to forgive.

You can know that every person bears God's image and still fear people who are different from you.

You can know that you are beloved and still build your whole life around proving your worth.

You can know that God is trustworthy and still need to control everything.

Transformation is when those truths begin to move from idea to embodiment.

Transformation is the gradual reshaping of who we are—our desires, reactions, relationships, assumptions, and ways of seeing—so that we become more open, humble, compassionate, free, and capable of love.

So the question becomes:

What actually breaks open the self enough for transformation to become possible?

Often, not success.

Not mastery.

Not accumulating more certainty.

More often, it is the experiences that take us beyond ourselves and beyond our control.

The moments when the identity we built is no longer enough.

When the answers that once worked stop answering the questions we are actually asking.

When we fail.

When we lose control.

When we love someone deeply enough that they change us.

When life becomes more complicated than the categories we had for it.

Those experiences rarely feel like growth.

They can feel like losing ground.

Like becoming less certain.

Less competent.

Less in control.

Like falling.

Richard Rohr calls this “falling upward.”

His point is that some of the deepest growth in our lives happens not because we successfully climb to the next level, but because something interrupts the climb.

He describes a pattern we often encounter as order, disorder, and reorder.

We build a world that makes sense. We develop an identity. We learn what we believe, where we belong, what success looks like, what God is like.

And we need that. We need some order. We need a container strong enough to hold a life.

But eventually something happens that the container cannot hold.

That is disorder.

And Rohr says two experiences in particular have enormous power to bring us into that kind of disruption:

great love and great suffering.

At first those sound like opposites. But both have a way of taking us beyond control.

Great love opens us to someone whose life we cannot manage. Someone matters enough to disrupt our expectations, our categories, even our understanding of ourselves.

Great suffering confronts us with something we cannot fix, explain, or control.

A death.

A diagnosis.

A betrayal.

A failure.

Or sometimes simply a person or experience that makes the world more complicated than we thought it was.

And that is where the old structure begins to loosen.

Because the things we normally identify as “up” — success, certainty, competence, control — can reinforce the self we have already built.

If life is working, why question the assumptions underneath it?

If I am succeeding, why question my definition of success?

If my theology seems to explain everything, why reconsider it?

But love and loss can reveal the limits of the structure we have built.

And that is where the real spiritual question begins:

What do we do when the world we built no longer holds?

Do we harden?

Do we cling tighter?

Or do we allow ourselves to be changed?

I know that one of the midweeks recently I reflected some on travel and what it teaches us. I have often been someone who seeks out new places or experiences, things that push me out of my comfort zone, partly because I'm so drawn to other cultures,

But during the in-between time of undergraduate and graduate school when I was trying to figure out my next step, I went to Kenya for several months to teach. And that experience catapulted me into disorder. It broke open my worldview in a way I had no idea was possible, and in a way that I didn't even know I needed.

I had absorbed, probably without even realizing it, a story that equated having more with doing better. More money, more resources, more infrastructure, more opportunities—those things meant success, progress, blessing.

And then I found myself in communities where people had far fewer material resources than I was accustomed to, and yet I was encountering things that my framework did not know how to account for: deep hospitality, strong community, generosity, joy, faith, interdependence, a sense of belonging.

It did not make poverty good. It did not make inequality acceptable. But it complicated the story I had inherited that wealth and abundance of resources automatically meant a fuller or better life.

I started to realize that maybe we had become very good at measuring what people possess, but not always very good at measuring what makes a life rich.

I realized that so much of life was filled with things that really don't seem to matter. Was rugged individualism, productivity and efficiency really what we needed to value most? I realized that grocery shelves filled with 35 options of cereal and 27 options of rice doesn't actually lead to freedom, but is perhaps what binds us. Having options always available - something that Americans expect - at the expense of affordable fresh food.

And I felt angry at the worldview I'd been given that America is "blessed" and "prosperous". For a while everything I thought I knew about the world and faith seemed irrelevant.

This was one of those moments of disorder that broke open my framework of everything I thought I knew.

Looking back, I think curiosity was one of the most important spiritual postures available to me in that season. Because once the framework cracks, you have a choice:

Because once the framework cracks, we have a choice.

We can get defensive.

We can explain away whatever does not fit.

We can cling even tighter to what we already believed.

Or we can become curious.

We can ask:

What am I seeing that I did not know how to see before?

What assumptions am I carrying that I have never examined?

What might this experience be asking me to reconsider?

Where might God be larger than the framework I have been using?

Curiosity asks, What am I seeing that I didn't know how to see before? What assumptions have I never examined? What might God be asking me to loosen my grip on?

And that last question matters, because none of us comes to this without something we are holding tightly.

Richard Rohr makes this point in a way I find both challenging and helpful.

"Based on years of spiritual direction, I have observed that conservatives must let go of their illusion that they can order and control the world through religion, money, war, or politics. True release of control to God will show itself

as compassion and generosity, and less boundary keeping. Liberals, however, must surrender their skepticism of leadership, eldering, or authority, and find what is good, healthy, and deeply true about a foundational order. This will normally be experienced as a move toward humility and real community.”¹

In other words, nobody gets to stand outside the work of transformation.

Every one of us has some way of organizing the world that makes us feel safe.

Every one of us has some certainty, some suspicion, some identity, some preferred way of being right that we may be asked to hold more loosely.

The spiritual question is: What am I being invited to loosen my grip on so that I can become more compassionate, humble, connected, and capable of love?

What is something you need to loosen your grip on in order to grow?

I think what we are naming is that transformation does not always mean gaining something. Sometimes it means becoming less defended, less certain that our perspective is the whole story, and more open to what God may still be teaching us.

There is no syllabus for transformation.

You cannot earn enough points and graduate into spiritual maturity.

You can't attend enough worship services to earn transformation.

We grow spiritually by becoming available to transformation.

We can cultivate practices that make us more available to being changed.

¹ <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/reorder-the-promised-land-2020-08-23/>

If I need to loosen my need to be right, maybe the practice is listening.

If I need to loosen my need for control, maybe the practice is Sabbath.

If I need to loosen judgment, maybe the practice is relationship with someone whose life I do not understand.

If I need to loosen self-sufficiency, maybe the practice is asking for help.

If I need to loosen resentment, maybe the practice is beginning the long work of forgiveness.

And when we allow that opening to change us, we do not necessarily emerge with more answers.

We emerge differently.

Less defended.

Less dependent on being right.

More capable of holding complexity.

More compassionate toward other people.

More willing to say, "I don't know."

More spacious.

Rohr calls that reorder.

And this is where I think Jesus gives us even deeper language for what this kind of spiritual maturity looks like.

Jesus does not begin the Beatitudes with:

Blessed are those who have mastered the faith.
Blessed are those who have all the answers.
Blessed are those who are spiritually impressive.

He begins:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

I don't think Jesus means, “Blessed are the people who think poorly of themselves.”

Or, “Blessed are the people who make themselves small.”

Maybe poverty of spirit is something closer to recognizing the limits of our own self-sufficiency.

Blessed are those who no longer have to pretend they have everything figured out.

Blessed are those who know they cannot control everything.

Blessed are those whose hands have opened enough to receive something they could never manufacture for themselves.

Because sometimes what is falling is not our worth.

What is falling is the illusion that our worth depended on being successful, certain, powerful, or in control in the first place.

Sometimes we become wiser by discovering how much we do not know.

Sometimes we become stronger by discovering we cannot control everything.

Sometimes we become more faithful by letting go of a certainty we once thought faith required.

Sometimes the way down is the way up.

So maybe spiritual maturity is not measured by how certain we have become, or how much theology we can explain, or how successfully we have avoided disruption.

Maybe it is measured by what all of that has made of us.

Are we more compassionate?

Are we less afraid of people we do not understand?

Can we listen without immediately defending ourselves?

Can we admit when we are wrong?

Can we live with mystery without panic?

Because perhaps the clearest sign that we are actually growing spiritually is not that we know more about God. But are we becoming more capable of love.

Discussion?

What is something you need to loosen your grip on in order to grow?

What questions come up for you in hearing this?