

Sermon – Sunday, April 16, 2023

Rev. Randi

Many of us may be familiar with Maslow's theories about the hierarchy of needs. Essentially, we all have basic needs such as food, shelter, and a sense of safety. Then, once those needs are met, we have higher-level needs, such as the need to be loved and belong, the need for self-esteem and respect in the eyes of our peers, and then the need to achieve our full potential or for self-actualization, as Maslow calls it. Maslow believes you can't move onto the next rung in the hierarchy until the needs of the lower rung are met.

James Fowler, a professor of theology at Emory University in the last part of the 20th century, developed a similar model around the seven stages of faith. His theory was that people moved through stages on the journey toward what he referred to as "universalizing faith." Not everyone makes it to the final stage, in which you love everyone and have compassion for everyone.

The first stage of faith is what we learn as an infant through the comfort we receive from our parents. Other early stages of faith center around what we absorb from the people around us, our intuition, and what we learn through stories.

Fowler calls the intermediate or middle stages of faith "mythic-literal" and "synthetic conventional." Mythic-literal involves beliefs that those who do good things will receive rewards and those who do evil will be punished. It also is linked to an anthropomorphic image of God – for example, a man with a white beard who lives in the clouds. Synthetic-conventional faith occurs when we identify with a religious institution and its creeds. In this intermediate stage, we don't allow questions or doubts into our faith because they conflict with our beliefs. Many adults stay in this stage of faith for their whole lives. In this stage, we come to church and recite the creeds. We identify with a particular denomination – in our case, Episcopalian. We have a sense of right and wrong. To people in this stage, Thomas's doubting is almost a heresy.

The next stage in Fowler's theory is referred to as conjunctive faith. Some folks might call this a midlife crisis. It occurs when we wrestle with the faith we've been taught. It happens when we doubt and question and then find a resolution that may differ from that of our parents or others in the faith community. We may see paradoxes and mysteries that we can't explain rationally. Yet we can hold these paradoxes in tension alongside our beliefs and claim a faith in God that is uniquely ours. Those in this stage are right with Thomas, who wanted to see the Risen Jesus for Himself rather than taking the word of the others. Then, like Thomas, once we see for ourselves, we declare, My Lord and my God.

The final stage is one in which we believe and act on the belief that all people are created in the image of God and worthy of compassion. We may give up most of our

possessions to help others and be radical in our belief in the equality of all people. Mother Teresa is an example of someone in this stage.

Although some feminist scholars have faulted Fowler's research because most of his subjects were men, much of what he says finds resonance with me. Many of you know that I grew up in the Southern Baptist tradition and experienced a tough time in young adulthood when the Holy Spirit led me to realize that tradition was no longer the one that best fit my sense of God's love for the world. Until then, I had been a very faithful Baptist and eventually wrestled with my beliefs to become a faithful Episcopalian. I'm still on the journey toward Fowler's final stage, and I'm not sure I will get there on this earth. But, I have successfully passed through the stage where I have declared Jesus to be my Lord and my God for myself, rather than taking the words of others. While my faith includes traditional items, such as the Creeds, it is uniquely mine based on my relationship with God and my inner wrestling. I identify with Thomas. I also continually find myself wrestling with issues of the day and deciding how I feel about them based on my faith. I sometimes feel the Spirit still leading me to change a perspective.

Today, I invite us all to consider where we are on Fowler's cycles of faith. How often do we think about what we believe – each of us –uniquely? How often do we grapple with changes in the modern world to see how they inform our faith or sense of call?

I invite those who have never considered their faith to pursue more Christian formation opportunities. Education for Ministry is a good one, but shorter programs can also help us examine our faith traditions against our own beliefs. I can recommend a few. If we have a solid understanding of our tradition, I encourage us to actively engage with those of other traditions – both different denominations of Christianity and other religions. Through that engagement, we also get to question what we've been taught, wrestle with it, and then develop a mature faith we uniquely own.

Thomas wanted to see Jesus for Himself. He wanted to develop his unique faith based on his experiences and encounters with the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, he declared Jesus to be His Lord and His God.

We may also need to wrestle a bit to become mature in our faith. Wrestling, questioning, and building our faith through the leadership of the Spirit is good. Because through that wrestling, we can also declare Jesus to be Our Lord and our God and really mean it.