

WGUMC March 26, 2017 "Stages of Faith: Finding Our Way"

John 13:33-14:7

*Come mothers and fathers
Throughout the land
And don't criticize
What you can't understand
Your sons and your daughters
Are beyond your command
Your old road is rapidly aging
Please get out of the new one if you can't lend your hand
Cause the times they are a-changing*

Bob Dylan's anthem of change not only captured what a lot of young people were feeling in America in 1963, but what young people have felt to a greater or lesser degree in every nation and generation. For when you finish high school, become an adult, the times are a-changing and you begin to feel an overwhelming need to change, too. You want to leave home, leave the security, question the authority and rebel against the conformity that has defined and confined your life up to this point.

Psychologists call this individuating. For parents, it isn't necessarily pleasant but it is necessary. Thank goodness our kids want to fly the coop at this age. Otherwise, we'd be stuck with them forever! Still, it hurts us when they make choices that seem to reject the values we have taught them. It doesn't feel good when they embrace lifestyles and belief systems that run counter to the way we have raised them. As a parent, it can be very hard to let them go and figure it out on their own.

We are talking about what James Fowler calls the "Individuative-Reflective Stage" of faith development. Up to this point, teenagers have been contained, so to speak, by the value systems of their family, church, and community. But as teenagers mature, they begin to develop the capacity to step back and reflect critically on that value system. Think about a boy who has grown up with an alcoholic parent but leaves home at sixteen when he realizes how unhealthy his family is. Or think about a girl who is raised in a religious household with

strict rules. As she gets older, she begins to see that the adults around her don't always follow their own rules or live by their own values, and disgusted by this, she leaves the faith.

The fact is that teenagers and young adults are on a crusade against hypocrisy, just like Jesus. Remember what Jesus said about the Pharisees? "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!...You snakes, you brood of vipers!" [Mat 23:29, 33] Doesn't that sound like a teenager?

So, it's almost inevitable that teenagers will reject the all-too-human authority figures who have been telling them what to think and what to do their whole lives. We all have a little Bob Dylan in us. But rebellion does not always bring freedom. Teens and young adults often substitute their peers or pop culture for their parents. It's easy to simply switch one set of authority figures, one value system, for another, without ever individuating and without thinking very deeply or critically

about your own beliefs. So rebellion in itself is no guarantee that you are leaving Stage Three.

We don't get to Stage Four faith until we are not only able to question our parents' beliefs but also our own. This happened to me when, like many other young adults, I left home to go to college. In some ways, I went far away, over 2200 miles by car. I went from a small city in the West to a big city in the East. I went from a very white, conservative community to a very diverse and politically progressive university.

But in some ways, I didn't go far at all. Boston University was historically a Methodist school. It still had a Methodist seminary. I sang in the Chapel Choir and got involved in campus ministry. I majored in religious studies while working on my premed requirements. So I was pretty successful at creating for myself a sense of security and familiarity in a big, strange city.

Nevertheless, my religion courses opened up a whole new world for me. I was fascinated by all the complexity and controversy that I found in Christian history. And I was delighted to learn that the questions I had about my faith have been asked by many other Christians for centuries.

In my sophomore year, I received my call to ministry, and it felt as if I were rebelling in reverse. I think my folks liked the idea of my becoming a doctor and serving as a medical missionary off in Africa, which is what I was thinking of doing. "Don't waste your good education on the church," my mother warned me. But I persisted. That summer, while I was home, I began to write my systematic theology. In terms of my faith, I had to know what I really believed, not just what I had received. What I was doing, though I didn't know it at the time, was working on that transition from Stage Three to Stage Four.

James Fowler says that it is typical to do this when we are in our late teens or twenties. But not everyone does the

reflective, self-critical work in those years. Not every young adult lives in their head as much as I did, thank goodness! Lots of young people live in their hearts, too, and that's a good thing. In general, we need more lovers than thinkers.

So many of us don't do a lot of critical self-reflection until our 30's or 40's when life forces us to. We get married. We get divorced. We lose a job. We change careers. We experience a death in the family. Something pretty big happens to us and we realize that the Stage Three faith that we got from our family or church or youth group, that faith that we took for granted and never really thought very deeply about, no longer has the answers to the questions life is throwing at us. And so we either have to start asking deeper questions of our faith or we will give up on it.

The Gospels give us many good examples of grownups who still need to grow in their faith. The first disciples acted more like teenagers when they first met Jesus by the Sea of

Galilee. He said, "Follow me." And on an impulse, they did. They left their nets. They left their families. They left their familiar routines, their rituals, their customs. They didn't go off to college, but they signed up for an intensive internship. Pretty soon, they found themselves living a radically new life that posed all kinds of new questions and challenges for them. They embraced a new set of values, "kingdom values," because this new life seemed so possible, the kingdom of God so reachable, as long as Jesus was there to make it believable.

But in our reading today, Jesus is telling his disciples that he is going to leave them, after they have left everything to be with him. And so these grown men are soon going to find themselves in a midlife crisis. It happens to all of us when life pulls the rug out from under us, when what had always worked before fails us or what we were hoping for doesn't come through for us or the person we were counting on gets up and leaves us.

In those times, the scary questions just keep coming at us. Peter and Thomas are asking questions of Jesus: Where are you going? Why can't we follow you? How can we know the way? Suddenly, the disciples are feeling lost, but that's OK. That is a good and necessary first step, for if you never feel lost, how can you be found?

Bob Dylan's real name is Robert Allen Zimmerman. He was raised in a Jewish family in Minnesota and had his bar mitzvah when he was 13. He married a Jewish woman and they raised five children. In the late 70's, he and his wife got a divorce. Seeing him depressed, several of his backup singers who were Christian reached out to him. Dylan was converted and got baptized in the Pacific Ocean in 1979. Now, he never stopped being Jewish, and in later years, he denied that he was "born again." He is now more of a mystic than anything, but we Christians have one thing in common with him, we are still finding our way.

For the disciples, the way ahead is anything but certain. And the questions they have for Jesus while he is still with them are easy compared to the questions they will have after he's gone.

Indeed, after the Crucifixion, the followers of Jesus will have to figure it out on their own. There is no manual for them. There is no institution to tell them what to believe or how to behave. They will be forced into Stage Four Faith and just have to live with their questions: Who is Jesus? Is he really the Son of God? Is he living now? And what difference does that make in my life?

All Christians have to wrestle with these questions, and Jesus isn't here to answer them. But he did tell his disciples this: "I will not leave you orphaned." [John 14:18] And then he promised to send the Holy Spirit to "teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you." [14:26]

Remember that the Holy Spirit is the one who drove Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and it is that same Spirit who will lead us into the kingdom of God. The Spirit, otherwise known as the Breath of God or the Wind of God, will do this by teaching us what we don't know and reminding us of what we do. In other words, Dylan was right: "The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind. The answer is blowing in the wind."