

WGUMC March 19, 2017 Luke 4:16-30  
Stages of Faith: Borders Without Walls

[This is the third in a series of sermons engaging with the work of James Fowler, a United Methodist pastor and Professor of Theology and Human Development at Emory University. In 1984, he wrote *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. In this third sermon, I am focusing on the third stage of faith that Fowler calls "Synthetic-Conventional" Faith for youth in early adolescence.]

The awkward scene is the church basement in Billings, Montana. I am sitting on the floor with a bunch of 11- and 12-year-old boys. They are doing whatever they can not to engage with the senior pastor who is trying to conduct a confirmation class. Paper and paints are spread out on the floor and he's telling us to paint a picture of the worst thing we can imagine every happening to us.

It's 1976, the year after the movie "Jaws" came out. So several of the boys paint pictures of themselves getting eaten by a great white shark. One boy, whose father is an airline pilot, paints a picture of a plane going down in flames. The rest paint

some combination of guns and blood to indicate both their greatest fears and their best fantasies. Boys!

Then there is me. I paint two planets on opposite sides of the page with a large forbidding space in between. On one of the planets I paint me. On the other planet, the word "God." It isn't hard for me to figure out where this conversation is going! In Fowler's language, I am transitioning between concrete operational thinking (being able to imagine getting eaten by a shark) to formal operational thinking (being able to think more abstractly and to reflect on who I am and how I relate to others). Girls typically get there sooner than boys.

But at some point in early adolescence every child goes through tremendous mental, emotional and physical changes. This is the age that we become self-conscious, and boy, was I self-conscious! We check the mirror constantly just to keep up on all the changes. But we also need people to be our mirrors, so they can reflect back to us what they are seeing in us as we

begin to construct our own personal identity. This is the age that we want our own story, one that situates us in the world and describes our relationships with other people and with God.

Remember from last week, how children in elementary school love stories. That's when we learn the stories of our families, friends, and faith traditions. But as we move into adolescence and our world begins to expand, we encounter lots of different stories. We spend time at our friends' houses and discover that not all families have the same story. We go to school and learn what science has to say about the origins of life. But the story of evolution is different than the story of creation we learned in Sunday School. So we get a clash of stories and figuring out who we are and how to put all those stories together in some coherent, unified "story of our stories" is one of the big challenges of adolescence.

Now we think that we are writing our own story in adolescence, but in reality we are going through a mostly

subconscious process of synthesizing other people's stories. That's why Fowler calls this the Synthetic-Conventional stage, because our personal story is a synthesis of the conventional stories of our family, our friend group, our school, our Boy Scout Troop, our soccer team, our church youth group. This is how I might have told my story back then: I am a girl. I am the third of four children in my family. I am a student at Will James Junior High School. I was born in Iowa but I live in Billings, Montana. I belong to the Flying Hooves 4-H Club. I attend First United Methodist Church, and I am enrolled in Confirmation Class.

As you can see, my identity was all wrapped up in other peoples' stories. So even when I thought I was making my own choices and forming my own beliefs, I was largely adopting the values and beliefs of the groups I belonged to and the people I respected and looked up to.

And there is nothing wrong with that. This is absolutely crucial for education and faith formation. This is what is going on when our kids go through confirmation. They are learning and confirming *our* values and *our* beliefs and, by doing so, they are building a strong and stable identity. This is why strong institutions are so important at this age. Healthy families, good schools, safe neighborhoods, welcoming churches—they all help us to raise healthy adolescents.

But there is a downside to this process of learning to conform. There is always the risk that we will over-identify with these other stories and give them too much power over our lives. That can happen because as adolescents we desperately want to fit in and so we conform to the groupthink, even when it's not healthy for us. On a subconscious level, we know that if we look like everyone else and act like everyone else, then we will feel affirmed and our identities will feel secure.

Then what happens when someone shows up who doesn't conform? When we are in adolescence, outsiders can make us feel uneasy and insecure, and our first impulse is to try to exclude them. So we build walls around our little group to protect ourselves. In time, we may realize that walls don't keep us safe; they only keep us separate. And if the goal is healthy adults in functioning communities, borders and boundaries are okay. They are even necessary. But walls can be instruments of war.

Come to think of it, maybe all wars start in middle school. At the beginning of seventh grade, my family moved. I had to leave my friends, my school, my first horse, and all my familiar surroundings in Sioux City, Iowa, and move to a subdivision five miles out of Billings, Montana. When I enrolled in my new school, I was immediately put in an eighth grade Algebra class. I was the only seventh grader in the class. That was bad enough, but I often got the highest grade on the tests. There was an

eighth-grade girl who lived in my neighborhood in my class. She was also in my 4-H club. One day, after I had ruined the curve one too many times, she turned around and sneered at me, "Why don't you go back to Iowa where you came from."

Believe me, at that moment, if I could have I would have, because I knew I didn't fit in, in so many ways. I was too nerdy, too shy, too tall and too much of a tomboy. I was an outsider, and I couldn't break through those walls, not in junior high or even in high school. It wasn't until I got to college clear on the other side of the country, that I began to find myself and feel confident enough to write my own story. What I learned is that I had to leave the walled city of junior high and high school, just like Jesus had to leave his hometown of Nazareth.

In our story in Luke today, Jesus has just come from wrestling with the devil in the wilderness. He has just begun his ministry. After working some miracles in Capernaum, he shows up in his hometown. He walks into the synagogue in Nazareth

and there were are all the people he knew growing up. But now he sees them in a new light. He sees friends, family and former neighbors as poor people who need to hear the good news, captives who need release, blind people who need to see, and oppressed souls waiting to be freed. But they still see him as the boy they once knew. They see him as a native of Nazareth, a good Jew, and the son of Joseph, certainly not the Son of God. So you can hardly blame them for thinking that they own him. And perhaps there was a time that they did.

But they don't any longer. Jesus returns to Nazareth, but he can't go home again. The town is too small and unimportant to have a physical wall around it, but there are walls in people's minds, walls that separate insiders from outsiders. When Jesus sits down to preach in the synagogue, he tries to break down those walls. He says that the promise of Isaiah isn't just for the Jews. The Good News is not just for the poor inside Israel but for the poor outside as well, for widows in Sidon and lepers in



Syria. Now Sidon and Syria are old enemies of Israel, so the good news that Jesus brings to the hometown crowd is that God is going to do good things for their enemies.

Just as soon as he takes the wall down, the townsfolk put it back up. In their anger, they drive him out to the brow of a hill. But when they are about to throw him over the cliff, he passes through the midst of them and goes on his way.

I can't help but think that the people of Nazareth are acting much like teens in Middle School and High School, policing the borders of their town the way teenagers police the boundaries of their cliques. They don't want any outsiders to question their conventional thinking and the stories they like to tell about themselves. And that's because once they reached Stage 3 faith they decided to stay there. Once they learned the traditions of the faith and embraced them as their own, they became unwilling to question them. But because they

aren't willing to question their assumptions about faith, they are not prepared to follow Jesus.

Jesus can pass through the midst of them, because he has already had his faith and his identity questioned. That's what the devil was doing in the wilderness and Jesus knows that he has to move on.

Spiritually speaking, a lot of us are living in small towns like Nazareth because it is comfortable there. We all know each other and we can pretend that we all agree with one another. But once we get past middle school, if we are still conforming, we probably aren't growing. I think that's what happened in lots of Christian Churches in the middle of the last century. The different denominations—Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, even Roman Catholics—operated like little towns where people were expected to conform to a certain set of beliefs and practices. And those little towns built big high walls to keep the "real Christians" on the inside safe from the

"questionable Christians" on the outside. Just be sure to be quiet when you get to heaven because the Baptists think that they are the only ones there, as the old joke goes.

I'm happy that that period in our history has passed. And I'm happy that we are raising Christians in this church who know that when it comes to being a Christian, there are good boundaries but there are no good walls.

Our youth group follows Jesus Christ, who has broken down every dividing wall. [Ephesians 2:14] Every fall, the high school youth go into the Tenderloin in San Francisco, breaking down the wall between their sheltered Willow Glen world and the hard reality of poverty in the inner city. Every summer, they get into vans and travel hundreds of miles to break down the wall between us entitled immigrants and the impoverished true natives of this country. Even before they leave for college, they have already left town in order to learn how to follow Jesus.

I'm pretty sure that none of us would want to return to middle or high school. But I wish I had had the experiences that our youth are having now back then. I had to wait until college and seminary. But I'm still lucky. I think of all the adults who are still waiting. I just want to say that it's not too late to leave town. It's not too late to leave our comfortable, conventional faith so that we can encounter Jesus on the other side of the wall, because he has always been one to spend more time with the outsiders than the insiders. If you open your heart and let it happen, the Holy Spirit will teach you what following Jesus means for you. You probably won't feel at all safe, but by God's grace, you will be saved.