

WGUMC April 2, 2017 "Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith"
John 4:1-30, 39

I've been preaching about the stages of faith for five weeks, and it's about time that we do a little review. It might help if we think about the various stages in terms of how we read the Bible at different times in our lives. Fowler calls Stage One the "Intuitive Projective Stage." This is a time when very young children don't distinguish between fantasy and reality and so the stories about Moses, Jesus, and Paul are no more real than the stories about Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny.

Stage Two is the "Mythic-Literal Stage." This is the stage when elementary school children get a better grasp on the real, but they understand everything, including what they read in the Bible, on a very literal, concrete level.

Later on, they enter adolescence and advance to the "Synthetic-Conventional Stage." At this stage, belonging and conforming are all important, and adolescents tend to accept

the interpretations of Scripture that are given to them by their family, church or youth group.

But sometime in their late teens or early twenties, young people begin to develop critical thinking skills. That's when they discover that there are some glaring contradictions in the Bible. This is Stage Four "Individuative-Reflective Faith."

In my first semester at college, I took Old Testament 101 and learned that Moses did not write the first five books of the Hebrew Bible and that the story of Noah came from an early Babylonian myth. This is why some Christians don't trust people with college educations. College students question: if the Bible is not 100% historically accurate, how can it be true? Because they mistakenly believe that historical truth is the only kind of truth, they will often throw out the Bible altogether.

Thomas Jefferson was a Stage Four reader of the Bible. He carefully cut out all the mythical, miraculous parts of the New Testament and left only the moral teaching. Now, we may

not actually take scissors to the text as Jefferson did, but we still have a tendency to dismiss the parts that don't line up with our ideology. And, what's more, we dismiss the people who read the text differently. Stage Four is a very partisan stage. It is where a lot of Christians (and members of Congress) live.

Believing in a perfectly logical, rational, and well-ordered universe may work for a while. But somewhere, typically in mid-life, we discover that life is more complex and truth is more multidimensional than we knew. We start to get a gnawing sense that something is missing, that there is a certain flatness to life that is unsatisfying. We start hungering for something deeper and more meaningful. When we start to have these kinds of thoughts and feelings, we are getting ready for Stage Five Faith.

In this stage, we may find ourselves returning to our childhood faith. After waging war on the myths of religion, we

are suddenly eager to get reacquainted with them. There are meanings there that we missed when we were too impressed with our own critical thinking skills. It's not that we are ready to embrace a literal interpretation of the Bible, but we are more ready to accept the Bible as a spiritual guide that can lead us to a deeper truth.

The notion that the Bible can hold some relevance for real life comes as such a surprise to some middle-aged people that they have to write books about it. Kathleen Norris and Anne Lamont are only two of the best-known authors who have written about their return to faith. These authors understand that the crucial thing is not how we read the Bible but how we let the Bible read us.

This is Stage Five Conjunctive Faith. The word *conjunctive* means "joining together." Conjunctive Faith is a faith that joins its commitment to critical thinking with a longing for mystical experience. Conjunctive Faith is willing to live with the

contradictions found in the Bible and the ambiguities found in life. It is a style of knowing that has moved beyond the either/or kind of thinking that divides people into camps of true believers and heretics, and operates in a space that allows people to come at the same truth from different perspectives.

So we have arrived at "Conjunction Junction" to use a phrase from the old School House Rock song. And it is at the junction between Stage Four and Stage Five faith that we find the Samaritan woman at the well.

The fact that she has had five husbands tells us that she is likely very familiar with either/or thinking. Men in those days didn't need a reason to divorce their wife. It was "either you satisfy me or you're history." Hard to imagine how any of those marriages could have been happy.

It comes as no surprise, then, that she isn't married to the man she is currently living with. Unfortunately, she has only ever experienced marriage as an either/or proposition and not

a both/and commitment. She has not, up to this point, experienced marriage as a commitment to stay together for both the better *and* the worse, the richer *and* the poorer, both in sickness *and* in health.

So the Samaritan woman comes to the well in the heat of the day, but water is not the only thing she is thirsty for. She finds Jesus there, who asks her for a drink and then offers her one. But the living water he is talking about is not something you can put in a bucket. It is not a thing but a relationship. Jesus offers himself and it is by entering into a relationship with him that she will discover in herself a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

She so wants that water and she's almost there. But first she has to get rid of the either/or thinking that has dominated not only her relationships but also her religion. And so she can't help but bring up a sore point between Samaritans and Jews. If

you are a Samaritan you worship on Mount Gerizim. If you are a Jew, you worship in Jerusalem.

But Jesus demolishes that division when he says that the hour is coming when you will not be constrained to worship either on this mountain or in Jerusalem. You can worship God anywhere. The important thing, Jesus says, is not where you worship but how you worship: in spirit and in truth.

The Samaritan woman at the well has never heard such things before. Clearly, Jesus is bringing a truth that is much bigger and braver than the one she had been taught. Her relationship with God is dependent not on space but on spirit, and that opens up all kinds of new possibilities. Perhaps Jesus is not just a prophet but the Messiah.

Stepping into Stage Five Faith can blow your mind. It's not that all the old questions get resolved, but we no longer feel the need to resolve them. Having all the answers just isn't

that important anymore. We don't need them to have a deep and meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ.

This is where I'm going to have to stop, because the kind of mystical experience I'm dancing around is impossible to pin down. Poetry gets much closer than theology, so I will close with a hymn poem I wrote four years ago and it is still my prayer for you today.

Fill This Jar John 4
[tune: Selena, #287 "O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done"]

*The well is deep, the sun is high,
the air is hot, the breeze has died.
This burden's mine, I have to bear,
but no one sees, and no one cares.
I am so tired of coming here
to fill this jar with all my tears.*

*My strength is gone, my hopes are spent.
I do not know where my dreams went.
You, by the well, just who are you?
And can you tell me what to do?
Why do you look at me that way?
What is it that you have to say?*

*You want a drink, but you can tell
I die of thirst beside this well.
You offer me the life I need.
By living water, I am freed!
I can't believe! How can this be,
that you would give such love to me?*

*My friends, this well is yours and mine,
and we can come here anytime.
Don't wait, come now, come as you are.
Let joy, not tears, fill up your jar.
The life of Christ, it overflows.
Take it from me as one who knows.*

March 3, 2013