

Stages of Faith

November 4, 2007

This morning I want to jump right into the story told in our Bible passage. The passage comes from Matthew. It is the third in a cluster of miracle stories found in Matthew. Perhaps it is these kind of stories, these miracle stories, that leave us with the most questions about our faith, and about what we believe. The first two clusters find Jesus healing lepers, calming stormy waters, exercising demons and making a paralytic man walk again. These stories...I think...cause us to question what we believe. However, the story I want to share from this last cluster of miracle stories focuses more on faith in a way that is broader and more holistic in its meaning. This particular part of the story is sandwiched in between two other miracles. The story I want us to consider comes just after the Bible passage starts...

As he finished saying this, a local official appeared, bowed politely, and said, "My daughter has just now died. If you come and touch her, she will live." Jesus got up and went with him, his disciples following along. Now...here is our story...Just then a woman who had hemorrhaged for twelve years slipped in from behind and lightly touched his robe.

She was thinking to herself, "If I can just put a finger on his robe, I'll get well." Jesus turned—caught her at it. Then he reassured her: "Courage, daughter. You took a risk of faith, and now you're well." The woman was well from then on.

Now let's stop and appreciate the pure drama of this story for just a minute before we consider the faith question. Jesus was doing all of this crazy stuff, preaching, teaching, healing...driving the authorities nuts. He had created quite a buzz, and the drama unfolding here in Matthew finds him on his way to do what...to raise someone from the dead. Can you imagine the excitement, the anticipation...the carnival-like atmosphere. Then in the midst of this is a woman who had been bleeding for some twelve years. She watched this all unfold before her eyes. However, she was what the Jewish people considered to be unclean. The Old Testament book of Leviticus is very clear it says that "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness."

So, here is this woman who has suffered alone with a serious medical condition. A woman who is shunned, and purposely kept separate...so, she says, "If I can just put a finger on his robe, I'll get well." So she takes a deep breath, summons all her courage and...touches.

Jesus' reaction and it's implied meaning puts us at the crux of our conversation about faith and belief. Again, Jesus said, "Courage, daughter. You took a risk of faith, and now you're well." I think this is significant because as several scholars point out—as does Jesus actually—her healing was not the result of any magic conjured up by the touching of his clothes, instead it was a result in her faith in Jesus' ability to heal. Moreover, when Jesus said to her "you're well," or as other versions of the Bible say, "your faith has healed you"—to heal or make well means to be made whole. So better said maybe is her faith made her whole?

So, it's like 1989, or some time in the late 80s and I'm reading this book called *Stages of Faith* by James Fowler. My mom, fresh out of seminary, decided I really needed to read this book. She had tried to pass off a bunch of other stuff on me that she was certain would draw me out of the abyss of my own semi-permanent church vacation.

The Layman's Guide to Theology, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, Mere Christianity...yawn, not interested, but thanks for playing. Then she finally snared me with this book...*Stages of Faith*. This book hit me like a ton of bricks. It quite literally gave me a new way to experience faith. For the first time ever in my faith journey, most of which had occurred over steep, rocky terrain, someone seemed to know how I felt. It affirmed where I was in my journey...it made sense of things. It affirmed that not only was questioning every aspect of one's faith and beliefs natural, but actually very good thing.

The premise of the book is that faith is dynamic and developmental—not static and monolithic. The basis for James Fowler's theory is Lawrence Kohlberg's *Stages of Moral Development*. His theory basically says, "Moral reasoning, which is the basis for ethical behavior, has six identifiable developmental constructive stages - each more adequate at responding to moral dilemmas than the last." Now, what Fowler has done is taken those basic stages identified by Kohlberg and placed his own model for faith development on top of them. I'd like to quickly share these stages with you—time does not permit us to explore each of them in depth, but I think together we can at least get the basic idea...

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective Faith

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith

I want to be clear about something here...these stages are fluid, and while it might seem like the goal is to "graduate" to Stage 6...or that stage 5 is superior to 4 and so on...this is not the case. This framework simply suggests a model for understanding where each of us are in our faith journey, and why we experience particular faith matters as we do. Let me give you an example...In Stage 2, the Mythical-Literal Faith Stage,

our stage of development is rather black and white—very concrete...very literal. Thus, our experience of faith matters is very much this way as well. When the Bible said, eye for an eye, tooth for tooth it meant eye for an eye, tooth for tooth. Or, if you've ever been around a 10 year old, you may have experienced a story they tell that doesn't miss one single detail. For instance, when you ask how was their day at school—grab a soft drink, a snack and sit down—your going to be there a while as you hear every detail of the day. The reason for this is that the world-view is shaped by tangible facts.

The interesting part here is that while developmentally this concrete stage is typical of 8-12 year olds, often times depending on your life's experiences and the intellectual and emotional nurturing we experienced—these characteristics manifest themselves in adolescents and adults too.

Then, in Stage 3, a person's experience of the world begins to deviate from this black and white, concrete sequential world of our childhood. Our sources of authority begin to be challenged. If you've ever had a child come home from school and say, "well, the teacher said to do it this way," you know what I mean! What is happening is that each of us is beginning to get different and sometime conflicting sources of information about what is most near and dear to us. AND, when this comes to matters of faith and belief, it can be really scary. When I was in high school, I was really struggling with matters of faith for this very reason. The faith of my childhood ran headlong into the emerging intellect of my adolescence, and to make matters worse, my mom actually added fuel to the fire. Mom, who was comfortably nestled somewhere between stage 4 and 5 boldly said one day—referring to the Bible and organized religion—she said, Stan, you don't have to believe all that stuff."

This...coming from my mother, the Presbyterian minister. So, I took her at her word—quite literally—from that moment on I began attending the high, holy church of St. Mattress at Serta. That's a smart-aleck way of saying I stopped going to church, period...for a very long time.

Now at this point I bet you are wondering what all this has to do with that woman who dared to reach out and touch the edge of Jesus garment. Are we going to try and figure out in which stage of faith she was? Not so much, really. What I'm more interested in is what that word, "faith" meant when Jesus said, "**You took a risk of faith, and now you're well.**" I think by understanding this word more deeply and openly we have a tool by which we can better understand our own faith journey and development. Moreover, for a moment might we imagine ourselves being the woman in that drama...having that kind of faith, whatever "that kind of faith" is and having our intellect remain intact.

So...what *did* this mean? I'd like to suggest right off the top that the words faith and belief have been hijacked. What they meant in the first century has been altered dramatically in our day. Many Christians in our day have come to "believe" that having faith means believing in a set of propositions, creeds and specific statements of doctrine made by differing religious traditions that are...dare I say, very Stage 2—concrete sequential. Thus it would not be uncommon to be made to feel today as if your *faith* is not strong if you don't *believe* a certain set of propositions. To the point of our Bible story today—based on this modern understanding of these words, we become very limited in how we might engage what happened in this story.

What of this word then, faith? Noted Religious historian Wilfred Cantwell Smith who has written extensively on use of faith language said, "**Major religious traditions never speaks of it in ways that can be translated by the modern meanings of belief or believing. Rather, faith involves an alignment of the heart or will, a commitment to loyalty and trust.**" He then goes on to say that Hindu treatment of the word faith, *sradha*, perhaps puts it best: "**It means, almost without equivocation, to set one's heart on.**"

So then, what of belief or believing in the modern sense? James Fowler goes on to say, "For the ancient Jew or Christian to have said, 'I believe there is a God,' or, 'I believe God exists,' would have been redundant" The being or existence of God was a taken and therefore not an issue. Again, Smith wrote, "**Literally and originally, to believe means to hold dear.**"

I wonder now, with these more authentic understandings of the words faith and belief how it lets us more readily place ourselves in that ancient drama at the moment the woman's finger was about to touch edge of Jesus' garment. It was her faith—meaning that **her heart and will were aligned to a commitment of trust**...it means she had her heart set on wholeness. She believed—that is to say—**she held dear** that if she set her heart on this, she could be made whole.

For the woman in this story it was her struggle with hemorrhaging—for us today it might be cancer, it might be seeking a new relationship, it might be facing career transition—whatever it is, I'd like to invite us to be part of that ancient mystery right now...just for a moment in silence, I invite you to, in your mind, or actually if you want, to reach your finger out-----Amen.

CLOSING:

I am fully aware that this approach I have put forward this morning gives us as many questions as answers. It is my prayer that in the asking of these fundamental questions of faith and belief that our faith journey is

enriched and we move toward a deeper connection with our God.