

Melanie Rosa  
Lakewood UMC

“Spiritual Maturity”

September 21, 2008  
Matthew 18:1-5  
1Corinthians 13:1-10

Today we are considering the topic of spiritual maturity, and that is a difficult thing to measure and even define. Jim Wallis has written extensively on the subject of faith and politics, and in one of his recent books, *The Great Awakening*, he tells a story about two Senators, a Republican and a Democrat who were discussing religion. They are sitting in the Senate dining hall, and as they are eating the Republican turns to the Democrat and says, “You Democrats really know **nothing** about religion.” The Democrat was offended and said, “Yes we do, we know a lot about religion.” The Republican says, “No, you don’t, you obviously don’t.” The Democrat says, “Well, as usual, you are wrong, because we do know a lot about faith and spirituality.” The Republican says, “Alright, I will bet you \$20 that you cannot even recite The Lord’s Prayer.” The Democrat says, “Fine, I will take the bet and gladly take your \$20. Are you ready? ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.’” And the Republican reaches for his wallet and says, “Darn, I never thought you would be able to do it.”

Well we are examining spiritual maturity, the undescrivable quality of someone who is in intimate relationship with the divine reality. Spiritual maturity is essentially a measure of a person’s practice of faith, hope, love, and the way that those things are manifested in their daily lives. We see such maturity in Jesus, the Dali Lama, Billy Graham, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa. It is also possible to see it in your hairdresser, in the janitor at your child’s school, in the waiter in your favorite restaurant. You see it when you observe patience and self-control, when someone offers you forgiveness that you did not deserve, grace you did not expect. You see it in people famous and ordinary, from all walks of life. You do not become a spiritually mature person automatically. It grows over time, deepening with the passage of the years. It takes discipline, life experience, struggle and suffering to acquire spiritual sensitivity. Such people no longer have the time or energy to be hateful, petty or unkind. They understand this life is far too short for anything but love. Spiritual maturity is essentially desiring what God desires.

I recall with some embarrassment how spiritually immature I have been at various points in my life. I have had narrow and limited notions of the holy, and there were times when all I cared about was that God would give me what I wanted, when I wanted it. Of course, my spirituality has matured over the years largely due to serving as a shepherd to God’s people and working closely with suffering, illness, birth and death. I now see God very differently than I did years

ago, and I realize that there is much that I will never know.

Anthony De Mello is a Jesuit priest and psychotherapist who has written some wonderful books on spirituality. De Mello wrote:

“I was a revolutionary when I was young. All my prayers were “Lord, give me the energy to change the world.” As I approached middle age I realized that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, so I changed my prayer to this: ‘Lord, give me the grace to change all those who come in contact with me. If I could change my family and friends I would be satisfied.’ Now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my one prayer is this: ‘Lord, give me the grace to change myself.’ If I had prayed for this right from the start I should not have wasted so much of my life.” (*The Song of the Bird*) When you work on yourself, and sincerely try to be the person God created you to be, you really can change the world. But it begins with you.

What we see in examining those closest to Jesus is that they were not spiritually mature. In fact they were quite immature, and we see the disciples being competitive, selfish, and clamoring for attention like spoiled children. At the Last Supper the disciples were fighting over who Jesus loved the most. He finally got tired of this and said, “You want to be great, let me show you how.” And he took a towel and knelt down and washed their feet. The one who serves others, that person is great. Another time, the disciples were asking the same thing, who would get the highest ranking in God’s kingdom. Jesus calls over a child that he placed on his lap and said that whoever became simple like that child would be truly great. A child who did not know the Ten Commandments, did not understand theology or eschatology, a child who trusted, believed, loved without reservation. So often when Jesus praises people in the Bible, it is not for their knowledge or wisdom, but for their trust. The ability to trust in what we cannot see is essential for spiritual maturity.

Now, this is not to be confused with certainty. Faith is trusting, while certainty is knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt. So much of the divine reality is shrouded in mystery which we do not understand and cannot explain, so defining religious faith in absolute and literal terms defeats the purpose. A mature faith does not lord superiority or knowledge over others, it does not boast, it does not condemn. It is manifested in behavior and action, far more than words.

There are various stages of spiritual growth, and different people have tried to define and examine them over time. I have found the most helpful theory of spiritual development was set forth by James Fowler of Emory University, who linked spiritual growth to emotional and psychological growth. He wrote a book called *Stages of Faith* in which he identifies six stages of faith development. In a

nutshell those stages of faith development are these:

**Stage 1:** Intuitive or Projective Faith. This is common in small children who do trust completely as Jesus suggested. They believe without hesitation. And yet God is not very sophisticated for them, thus they might not be able to distinguish between God and Santa Clause or the tooth fairy. While you want to have the trust and belief of a child, you want to mature in your understanding of God, so you do not want to remain in Stage 1 forever.

**Stage 2:** This is Mythical/Literal Faith. Characteristic of school age children, although some people never grow beyond this stage. Here faith is taken literally and comes from an external authority and centers on simple rules, “If I am good God will bless me.” “If people are mean, they will be punished.”

**Stage 3:** Conventional Faith. Most teenagers and young adults are found in this stage where faith is conformed to the expectations and beliefs of their peers or authority figures. There is not too much critical examination of beliefs until they experience suffering or tragedy.

**Stage 4:** Intuitive/Reflective Faith. This is a faith that has come through trial. The faith of one’s earlier years has been tested and even shattered and has to be rebuilt. People here are asking unique questions and claiming faith for themselves, not just accepting the beliefs of others. This involves critical thinking and struggle.

**Stage 5:** Conjunctive Faith. This is a stage in which things come together, when a person can accept paradox and mystery. They become more open to the beliefs of others and know that God is much greater than human minds can comprehend. It is characterized by acceptance and living with unanswered questions.

**Stage 6:** Universalizing Faith. In this stage faith is characterized by selflessness, unconditional love, and the willingness to suffer for others. It is what Jesus demonstrated, and it is very rare and embodied by people like Mother Teresa. In the Methodist tradition, this stage of faith development is known as sanctification.

Now many people never move beyond a stage of faith development in which God is viewed as their personal Santa Clause, there to give them what they want and protect them from evil. Spiritual maturity understands that faith is not about us and what we want. It is about aligning ourselves with what God wants, and making ourselves available to help accomplish God’s purposes in the world.

We should all aspire to keep growing, learning, developing a love for God as we explore the complexities and mysteries of faith. And of course we do that by keeping spirituality a priority in our lives, and asking God to help us and mold us into the best people we can possibly be.

One example of spiritual maturity given by Rev. Adam Hamilton in his book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White* is that of Southern Baptist Evangelist

Billy Graham. Now Billy Graham may seem like the pinnacle of spiritual maturity, yet he experienced times of challenge and tragedy that led him to question all of his earlier assumptions about faith. He also came to embrace other Protestants beyond Southern Baptists, and Catholics, and for this he was severely criticized as compromising the Gospel. In an interview in *The Christian Century* Billy Graham said, "I am now aware that the family of God contains people of various denominational differences. Within the church there is a mysterious unity that overrides all divisive factors. In groups which in my ignorant piousness I formerly frowned upon, I have found people so dedicated to Christ that I feel unworthy in their presence. I have learned that although Christians do not always agree, they can disagree agreeably in order to show the world that we love one another." (*Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White*, 31)

In a cover story article on Billy Graham that appeared in *Newsweek* in 2006, his daughter said that his views have softened over the years due to life experience and suffering. The article said: "He is still unequivocally committed to the Gospel, but increasingly thinks God's ways are shrouded in mystery. 'There are many things I don't understand,' he says. He does not believe that Christians need to take every verse of the Bible literally. "Christians can disagree about the details of Scripture and theology and this is a difference in my thinking down through the years." ("A Pilgrim's Progress" *Newsweek*, August 14, 2006)

It may seem ironic, but spiritual maturity is making peace with that which you cannot define or comprehend.

As you know just ten days ago we commemorated the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks upon our country, and we were reminded of the loss and suffering that continues to this day. One woman was interviewed earlier this month and she talked about her constant sadness over the fact that her children will never really remember their father, what he looked like, smelled like, the sound of his voice. They were just too young when he was killed in the World Trade Center. She was putting together some books of pictures and memories, and wanted those kids to vividly remember him. She wanted them to know that his philosophy of life was this: "Live life to the fullest every single day, and take care of one another." Now there is nothing theological about that philosophy, but it is the heart of our faith. "Live life to the fullest every single day, and take care of one another."

Jesus said that he came that we might have life, abundant and eternal life. And he didn't emphasize only the life promised us after we die, he meant this life here and now. He wants us to fully embrace every experience, every relationship, every opportunity life sends our way and take nothing about this good life for granted. And he wants us to take care of one another. To look out for our

neighbor, both near and far away. To be concerned about those who suffer and struggle, and to have compassion for every living creature on earth.

St. Paul defined what this looks like when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth who were fighting, and debating non-essential matters and hurting the unity and mission of Christ's cause. Paul knew of their conflict and their immature ways of handling it, so he wrote them a letter trying to explain what a spiritually mature person would look like. His description of spiritual maturity is classic, and to my mind there is nothing that can surpass it anywhere.

So today I thought we would read it together, but I want to invite you to do it a bit differently this time. Every time you see the word LOVE you are going to substitute your own name. For instance I would say:

Melanie is patient. Melanie is kind.

Are you ready? A classic description of spiritual maturity:

**Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on her/his own way. Love is not irritable or resentful. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong, but in what is right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.**

May it be so for each of us....

Let us pray: Thank you for loving us, dear God. Forgive us for the times when we are unloving and selfish. Help us to love, to trust, to believe, and to continue to grow into spiritual maturity all the days of our lives. Amen.