

How Mature is your Faith?

Mark 9:30-37

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. May the words of my mouth and the ears of our hearts be open to the word of God this day. AMEN.

Spiritual maturity is something we generally don't talk about here at the church. But let me ask you what level of spiritual maturity do you believe you are at? Most of you are here on a regular basis for worship. You may be involved in committees and council. You may do many things during Sunday school and involved in teaching the Bible. You may have been a member here or at another church for years and years. So with all that experience and time in the ministry how mature is your spiritual walk with God?

This past week another minister at a pastor's group, I generally attend, asked us this very question. Now keep in mind this is a pastor's group; ministers trained to preach the word of God, to share the Gospel, to live in ministry. What kind of answers do you think he got to his question about where we ranked our spiritual level? Well let me just say it wasn't good. I am ashamed to say it most pastor's say they don't have a good strong mature spiritual life in their day to day ministries. That's not to say we are not doing ministry. Ministry goes on with worship planning, preaching, praying, teaching, visiting, counseling, ministering, ministry is happening all around but when you stop and take a moment and examine the deeper self, stop the business of the day and the work that needs done, the question of how has your spiritual life deepened goes unanswered.

All of us face this we join Church, we're baptized into it, we affirm our faith, we put on the suit and tie, shine up the shoes, and we sing our songs. And we go through our lives of business and work and family and doctors and banking and sports and so much stuff that under it all we wonder how has our faith been deepened? Some of you may have been coming all dressed up and ready for worship every week for 6 months, 5 years, 50 years or your whole life, has your spiritual life changed in all that time, has it grown or deepened since you first heard the Bible Stories, learned how to pray, learned what it meant to be a good worshipper and supporter of the church? Or once you got all that stuff done it stopped and you have been at the same level the rest of your life?

The pastor that started this whole conversation was working with his congregation through an 8 week process based on the book "The Emotionally Healthy Church" by Peter Scazzero. In this book Peter explains the different levels of our emotional and spiritual states. We are either infants, children, adolescents or adults.

The infant is just like a physical infant that always is looking for other people to take care of them. They have difficulty in describing and experiencing emotions and faith in healthy ways, and rarely want to enter into discussions about their faith or feelings. They are driven by a need for instant gratification, often using others to meet their needs. They are perceived as inconsiderate, insensitive and self centered.

Ever know anybody like that? Are you like that in your faith?

Or how about the child. Peter Scazzero says The Child is like a physical child that is just content and easy going as long as everything is going their way. As soon as disappointment, stress, tragedy, denial, or anger enter the picture the person unravels and gets offended easily. When they face this they quickly complain, throw tantrums, withdraw, manipulate, become sarcastic or seek to overpower and get their own ways. They believe in God as long as everything is fine, but when adversity hits, God is forgotten or cursed.

How about this level of maturity, ever know anybody like this? How about the church itself the family of St. Mark? Do we face conflict this way at times, we're okay as long as everything is going smoothly, but it all unravels into chaos and power struggles as soon as we think we are not getting our way.

The author then gives yet another level **The Adolescent** the one who knows how exactly you need to act to fit in, to blend in, to not stand out. This person can feel doubt, fear, pain, all right under the surface without showing it lest others might know we are weak. Much of our time is concentrated on self-survival, just keeping the head above water, always feeling like the next wave may take you down. This person has trouble truly listening to another's pains, disappointments or needs without becoming pre-occupied in comparing their own pains, disappointments or needs.

How about that level of spiritual or emotional maturity? Again are you like that or do you know others like this? Even the church can be compared to this level again? Are we about self protection, knowing pain, doubt, fear, but not wanting to really do something about it, just lets keep it below the surface, make sure everyone is happy with us. Don't risk doing anything, because it is new and is troubling.

Then there is the last stage – **The Adult** - the one who can love, respect, and honor others without having to change them, judge them, or criticize them. The one who appreciates others for who they are, the good and the bad, not for what they can give them, or how they behave, but simply because they are part of God's creation. When under stress these people don't fall into blaming or accusing others, instead they can state their beliefs and values to those who disagree without becoming adversarial. They are convinced that they don't need the

approval of others because the most important thing is knowing that they are absolutely loved by God, so they have nothing to prove.

We would all like to say we are at the adult level of our spiritual and emotional life, but generally speaking most Christians rank down in the child level, some a little lower and some a little higher, but mostly we all have work to do on our spiritual walk with God.

Just look at the disciples today in our Gospel reading. These are the inner group, the core followers of Christ, they have seen miracles upon miracles. They have been called by name to follow the Son of God, they have identified him as the Messiah, the chosen one, the anointed. They believe and risk their lives to leave home and follow him, and yet what level is their spiritual life at this point?

On the road through Galilee they argue amongst themselves who is the greatest. Boy doesn't that sound just like children. I'm better than you. No I am better than you. Ya but, Jesus likes me the most. I am the greatest. Very much like little children arguing amongst themselves. And then even when Jesus confronts them they again fall into childish ways. What were you arguing about...Nothing! Very immature in their beliefs and in your walk with God.

So Jesus reminds them to be first they must be last of all and servant of all. To give up their wants, their demands, their assumptions and become the servant of all. Just as he is about to do, giving up his very power and glory as the Prince of Peace and Life, the light of the world. To offer up his own being for all humanity. To be the Lord almighty and come to serve all people even as they reject and crucify him, he offers his love and forgiveness, his redemption and salvation.

To emphasize this great message of mature faith, Jesus embraces a child. A young child that is worthless in their society, helpless, doesn't provide, make, or produce anything, is not influential or powerful, does not win favor not one single bit. To embrace such a one as this one knows what it means to welcome Christ, to be connected with God. To embrace people, friends and strangers alike, those who are powerful and those who are not, those who are rich and those who are poor, to embrace all people and show them the love of God that God has first given to you, that is mature faith.

The disciples didn't get it, we pastor's this week acknowledged that we can not say we always do this. I would think that all church communities can not honestly say they follow this mature level of faith. And I would imagine that you would acknowledge that each of us have a long way to go in our faith journey. We may be infants, children or adolescents, we may fall into arguments over which is greatest, who is right and who is wrong, what is best and what is most desired. But Jesus shows us yet a more better way, the mature faithful adult who walks with

God before everything else, who accepts and welcomes, who seeks out the hurt, who offers the word of hope, who empowers by love and not judgment. We each are on that road of faith with Jesus, we are on the way and the question I leave with each of you is how do you answer when Jesus asks, what are you arguing about, what are you concerned about, what is occupying all your time along the way of your life in faith? Amen.

May the peace and Grace of God be with you this day and throughout the week to come. AMEN.

Let us pray for the whole people of God in Christ Jesus, and for all people according to their needs.

Almighty Lord, you sent to us Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. He came into this world of sinfulness and pain and suffering to grant us hope. He came because of your love for us, that even in our sinfulness you would have us turn to you and seek forgiveness and life eternal, to deepen our faith and grow in our relationship to you, our Lord and Creator. Continue to grow within us the spirit of your power and might.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer..

O Heavenly Father, we ask that you send your grace to fill us once again come before you in prayer. Bring us into new life, new joy, restore us to your everlasting kingdom and make us your

witnesses of your love. Shake the earth, move the mountains, and empower your people with a deep faith that does all things as witnesses of your kingdom.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, Hear our Prayer.

God, stretch out that healing hand once again and lay it upon all those who are sick, that are in need. Send your comfort and peace to be with those who suffer from oppression, drought, famine, or war. Send your healing to be with all those who suffer from sickness, from disease, Give peace to those troubled both physically and mentally. And also this day we remember before you our hospitalized and shutins... Ann Bevins, Gladys Garrett, Stephen Perdue and all those we lift up to you now....

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Lord, we pray for this community of faithful; teach us to use the many gifts you have given us for the mission of your Church. Be with our sister churches of the Hanover Conference so that together we may spread your word and your love. Us as your stewards, filled with your gifts and word, drive us to new challenges, to draw closer to you and towards each other, to deepen our faith and grow in our mission. Use us as your servants in this community and beyond to spread your word, to share your good news.

LORD IN YOUR MERCY, hear our prayer.

Into your hands, o Lord we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.