“Spiritual Growth Is Optional”

Romans 4:13-25 Mark 8:31-38

Second Sunday in Lent, Year B, February 28, 2021

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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A few years ago former pastor, Nancy Copeland-Payton led a retreat here sharing practices and themes of contemplation, which is experiential faith. To begin the retreat and welcome everyone, she invited us to reflect on physical growth, the arch of lifespan beginning with baby, then toddler, young child, teen, young adult, up to middle age. Our bodies change and adapt through all these phases of life. Physically, proportions shift as our limbs get longer and our body adjusts as it learns how long our arms are. We may spill a few things before we get it figured out. Most people look different after middle age than they did in high school, to the point where if we see a long lost friend in the grocery store, we might not even recognize them. Physical changes are part of life.

For the second half of life, Pastor Nancy invited us to also consider physical changes, but these usually involve decline. As we age, we get shorter, bones become brittle, balance may go away. But getting physically old is mandatory if you want to live a long life. Bodies aren’t designed to last forever. If you’re in the senior category, although you may be in good health, it’s not the body of a 20 year old jumping out of bed in the morning. Throughout our lives, physical growth is mandatory, and changes take place along the way. These happen whether we want those changes or not.

A key aspect of growing older through the bell curve of growth, peak, and decline is to recognize that this is not the only line on the chart. Life’s physical process is not necessarily the driving factor. Another line involves faith. Second half of life spirituality is learning how to allow and help spiritual growth take place in ever increasing ways that don’t diminish but only enhance as they build upon that which came before.

But Nancy reminded us of a key point. Unlike physical changes, spiritual growth in the second half of life, is optional. And spiritual growth is hard, it can be quite painful and involves suffering, so it’s tempting to shy away from it, to not want to change. Because it’s optional, we don’t have to. We can set our spirit on cruise control, avoid challenges, flatten the line, and ask God to protect us.

But rather than get tunnel vision like a deer in the headlights, we can welcome the peripheral as we’re invited to turn and notice God’s action and activity, even if rather subtle. We can choose, like all other biblical characters wrestle with, to say “Yes” to God as we consent to God’s Living Presence leading us from the inside.

This morning’s texts are about welcoming God’s promises. They’re about growing, yet while the physical side of it gets some attention, the energy of the narrative is about spiritual faithfulness, expanding love, and fulfilled promises that are ongoing. Genesis 17, which we didn’t read out loud this morning is the story of God establishing a covenant with Abram and Sarai, their names changed to Abraham and Sarah. We did read Romans, where in chapter 4 the Apostle Paul echoes those dynamics at work in that earlier call story of promises made, as the spiritual realm influences the physical. In righteousness, as everything is working as intended, Abraham and Sarah respond in faith. Faith is a deep trust that God is doing what God will do and this is good. In fact it’s so good that we call it “grace” because God’s goodness and presence is shared as a gift.

In Mark, the ministry of Jesus is getting some heat. Adversaries are starting to go about the predictable work of limited thinking, which means resistance is building. As people begin to plot against Jesus, Mark uses the term Son of Man. It’s a term that welcomes us into the loop as Jesus embodies the fullness of humanity so what happens to him is archetypal to what happens to all of us. We all deal with egoic limitations that create boundaries and then we defend them, writing off the unknown as bad and worthy of resistance. Jesus is showing us how to deal with this judging dynamic, and he leads by example.

The Son of Man must undergo suffering. Welcome to the human race! Suffering is a necessary part of life, not pleasant, but unavoidable. What stands out as Jesus shares is that “he said all this quite openly.” Most of the time, it seems, suffering is behind the scenes, out of public view, private, or held close. Family secrets, personal struggles, inner turmoil. Our public face does not always match up with private realities. “What would the neighbors think? How would my boss treat me?” For kids, “My parents can’t know about that!” For parents, “My kids can’t know about that!” Especially if there’s something tragic, we may be grieving or carrying pain while the rest of the world just keeps on going without noticing, maybe it seems no one cares. That Jesus talks about suffering not only openly, but quite openly, is unusual and refreshingly honest.

Apparently it is honest, but not what his disciples want to hear. Like a pastor standing up in front of everyone saying, “Second half of life spirituality is really important, but is it ever hard! No wonder mystics call it the dark night of the soul!” Doesn’t sound like much of a recruitment tool and I doubt it’s the next slogan for a church growth movement in terms of adding numbers to the membership. But it’s honest. In terms of spiritual growth, it’s spot on! Giving God a blank check and saying, have your way with me is an invitation to suffering because God will show you what breaks God’s heart; God will bring you, like Jesus, up against resistance by those who prefer the destructive side of ego because, by human standards, they seem to be benefiting.

One of the disciples who doesn’t like what Jesus says is Peter, who takes him aside and rebukes Jesus. Peter, one of the most devout disciples who earlier calls Jesus the Messiah, is now getting in the face of Jesus to the point where Jesus says, “Get behind me Satan!” Notice Peter takes Jesus aside. So much for openness, for sharing as a community, for combining strengths. Isolation, secrets, removed. Remember earlier in this gospel Jesus was driven to the wilderness by the Spirit and one aspect of that experience was temptation by Satan. As Peter now rebukes, Jesus had already done his spiritual work, his soul-searching, and decided the graph needs to go up; spiritual growth. Peter wants to drag it down, echoes of the temptation story. Jesus tells Peter to get behind him, which is a spacial image of following the leader and not becoming a stumbling block to others on the Way.

It’s the peripheral vision that breaks the isolation, interrupts the temptation. “But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter.” Another biblical echo of all the times people stop and turn, and in turning they notice God trying to get their attention. Moses turns and sees the burning bush, this is probably the most famous. The status quo of life is somehow interrupted yet seemingly out of nowhere, unpredicted, something comes along that provides a new approach, a third way that breaks the either/or dichotomy we often settle for through dualistic mindsets. Oh, there’s a term. Dualist mindset. That’s another phase in this expansive drama as Jesus point out that Peter is setting his mind not on divine things but on human things, as if it’s either/or. The rest of the narrative, the rest of this passage is a teaching about letting go, opening up, giving over, dying to find life, and at a deeper level, the unitive shape of God’s love that holds everything together. This is core to spiritual growth, and second half of life is tailor made to give perspective to see Jesus’ point, asking, “what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?...what can they give in return for their life?” People have a frame of reference when they hear Jesus use terms like, an “adulterous and sinful generation.” Yet we’re also challenged to set aside those very perspectives.

In last Tuesday evening’s Taizé devotional time via Zoom, we explored time-as-duration as being foundational to “perspectival consciousness.” Those are big words, but [Cynthia Bourgeault and Jean Gebser and Jeremy Johnson](https://cynthiabourgeault.org/2021/02/21/faces-of-time/) have written to help unpack these terms as they remind us of Christ’s call to die before we die, to let go of that which cannot satisfy like God’s presence can.

I stated that in light of scripture, as we hear Jesus mention the “adulterous and sinful days” or the “adulterous generation,” he’s not accusing, he’s making us aware, (it’s the turning) reminding us that we’ve exchanged the real thing for an attractive substitute; that’s what adultery is. That limiting substitute is time; the days, the generations. The real thing, that which our life is better defined by, is eternity, not as time duration without end, but as the shaping, intensifying quality. Eternity holds time from outside of time. We are eternal beings, and our soul is not limited by finitude.

We hear Jesus talking about losing life to find life, taking up our cross and following, and how important it is to gain our soul rather than lose it. The emerging of soul, discovering true life, and faith as an experiential, transformative journey all involve waking up to God’s Presence, who Is, our Source and our Origin, not externally, but within.

As we go through life, we’re invited by the Son of Man to pay attention to soul-work, to look for ways God is catching our eye, to turn and notice divine things, perceived through the heart in soul-bending ways. Lent is a season of invitation, to explore the ever-present-Origin, God, and second half of life is prime opportunity to invite that different type of knowing, a felt-sense, called “faith,” in ways that set aside limited perspectives and previous assumptions. This is not easy, and it’s countercultural in a world of instant gratification, time as money, recreational pleasures, privileges, defensiveness, and retribution, so it’s no wonder Jesus uses the image of scandal and pain: picking up our cross and following him, a form of self-denial, or shall we say, “false-self denial” in order to discover our “True Self in Christ.”

Thanks be to the Son of Man, inviting us on a very difficult journey, to travel together as a communion of saints diving deep into spiritual transformation as we follow Christ. Thanks be to God for freeing us from ourselves, our own concepts and perspectives, through the New Covenant’s gift of grace, God’s-self, promised and fulfilled in Christ. Growing in the depths of spirit, may God’s humble, vulnerable love be glorified, NOW, even as forever. Amen.