

From the Pastor's Desk

Maturing in Faith

I remember the first and last time I played Santa Claus. I had returned home from college for Christmas break and mom indicated the person who was planning to play Santa was unavailable and she was wondering if I would do the job. Christmas Eve was one of the most important family gatherings we had and all members of the family made every effort to be present. I had several nieces and nephews that still believed in Santa and his visit to the house was always one of the highlights of our time together on Christmas eve. I was reluctant to play the role because I only weighed about 150 lbs and was not the Ho! Ho! Ho! kind of guy. Determined to give it my best shot, I went into the basement to make the transformation, stuffing pillows, putting on the beard, red suit, hat and a kind of nose / cheeks plastic mask. One look in the mirror added to my anxiety. I didn't make a very convincing Santa, but mustered my strength, went up the steps into the back entry, banged on the door and said "Ho! Ho! Ho!" to the best of my ability. My nieces' and nephews' eyes widened and their mouths fell open with amazement as I entered the living room and started passing out presents. With a nephew on my knee and others gathered around, we posed for a picture. Rather than looking at the camera, one of them looked up at me and said, "Hey, that's Uncle Henry!" Yikes!! I knew it was time to bring this visit to a quick conclusion and Ho! Ho! Hoed! myself right out the door as loud as I could.

The nephew that blew my cover was around six or seven years old, which some have called the "age of reason". As we age, our faith evolves and changes. Belief in Santa Claus gives way to an understanding that is more mature and rational. We accept that the myth around Santa Claus was built upon a real person, Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, which is in present day Turkey. He was generous and shared his wealth with children and others, especially the poor. But belief in flying reindeer and a sleigh are set aside as we enter a different phase of faith.

Author and Methodist minister, James Fowler, in his book "Stages of Faith" proposes a staged development of faith across a person's lifespan. His work is similar to Lawrence Kohlberg's "Stages of Moral Development". Reviewing Fowler's stages is helpful in understanding our faith development and why children stop believing in Santa.

Fowler's first stage is called "Undifferentiated Faith" where an infant's experience of reality is not distinguished from fantasy. As the child develops the capacity for concrete thinking, she then moves toward stage two called the "Literal Stage", where she starts distinguishing reality from fantasy. In this stage, God may be perceived as an old man living in the sky, while heaven and hell are viewed as actual physical places. Here, one believes that if they follow the rules, God will give them a good life. But they begin to grow out of this stage when encountering conflicts and contradictions to what they hold to be true. The perplexing question, "Why do good people suffer?" begins to challenge them at this stage.

Around puberty, a person moves into Fowler's third stage, "Conventional". As in the previous two stages, authority is still located outside of one's self. Here, people are not fully conscious of having chosen to believe something, because they are not engaged in any analytical thought about their faith. It's called "conventional" because most people at this stage see themselves as believing what everyone else believes. They are reluctant to change their beliefs because of their need to stay connected to their peer group. Many church leaders attempt to keep people in this stage by discouraging analytical thinking about their faith. They imply that questioning one's faith in itself shows a lack of faith. However, those who do, begin moving on to the next stage.

Many men who leave the priesthood find it is necessary in order to further mature and progress to the next stage.

In stage four, "Individuated Reflective" faith, young adults become aware of their freedom and burden to begin to sort through their beliefs, accepting or rejecting them. Here one's sense of authority moves from the external to the internal. A person is better able to govern themselves and is less dependent upon rules. The literalism of religious stories begins to give way to deeper meanings. The strength of this stage is the capacity for critical reflection, but the weakness is that a person may "throw out the baby with the bath water", claim to be atheist, and fail to enter into the next stage.

Stage five is the "Integrating Faith" of middle adulthood. Here a person is able to expand their worldview beyond the "either/or" position of the previous stage, toward a "both/and" point of view. People in this stage are willing to cross religious and cultural boundaries to learn from people they may have previously avoided. Here one believes in God, but not as a literal being living in the sky, and Heaven and Hell are no longer seen as physical places. They re-examine their beliefs, while at the same time accepting that it is beyond their ability to comprehend. They realize truth can also be found in other religious traditions besides their own and no longer need to accept their faith on a literal level only.

Fowler indicates that stage six, "Universalizing Faith" is reached by very few people. Examples he names are Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa. These people are able to sacrifice their own wellbeing for that of their cause. They can be perceived as being subversive, because their views can be radically different from that of conventional society. They stand with people who are being exploited. Many people at this stage die at the hands of those they hope to change. They are visionary people and often honored more after their death than when alive. They risk their safety in order to change societal structures that keep people oppressed.

These stages are broad generalizations and boundaries between them are thin. They are helpful in seeing the general direction of faith development, and in explaining why people may have various opinions about faith. An inclusive faith community accepts that no one person has all the answers and much of faith is a mystery known only to God.