

## **The Spirituality of Young People and What We Can Learn**

Deuteronomy 31:6, Philippians 4:6-7

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*"Be strong. Take courage. Don't be intimidated. Don't give them a second thought because God, your God, is striding ahead of you. God right there with you and won't let you down or leave you."*  
*Deuteronomy 31:6 The Message*

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*  
*Philippians 4:6-7 NRSV*

Teenagers. A few definitions

- When you are too young to for half the things you want to do & too old to do the other half.
- A stage when you think you are smarter than your parents but are forced to live with them
- Insightful people in transition from childhood to adulthood who are discovering their strengths, forging their identity, learning consequences for behavior, developing resilience and are amazing.

I love teenagers. Most of my early ministry years were focused on youth ministry. I like teenagers because they are funny, open, playful, compassionate as well as self-absorbed. They are insightful. They can be awkward and also profound.

Being a teenager is wonderful and hard. Think about when you were a teenager. Who were your friends? What did you do for fun? And were you in a church or not? What messages were you getting about God, about religion, about Jesus, about church? What was helpful and what was not? We continue today our July series of worship services and sermons to reflect on faith & spirituality at various stages and seasons of life.

### **Developmental Models**

When we think about the spirituality in developmental terms, we can go back to one of the primary researchers that looked at stages and development from children through adults of all ages - James Fowler.

### **Stage 3: Synthetic-conventional Faith**

Generally starts about the age of 13 and goes until around 18. However, some people stay at this stage for their entire life. Unlike previous stages, people at this stage are able to think abstractly. What were once simple unrelated stories and rituals can now be seen as a more cohesive narrative about values and morals. With abstract thinking comes the ability to

see layers of meaning in the stories, rituals and symbols of their faith. At this stage people start to have the ability to see things from someone else's perspective. This means that they can also imagine what others think about them and their faith. People at this stage claim their faith as their own instead of just being what their family does. However, the faith that is claimed is usually still the faith of their family or lack of faith or religion. Think of confirmation and bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah.

Issues of religious authority are important to people at this stage. For younger adolescents, that authority still resides mostly with their parents and important adults. For older adolescents and adults in this stage, authority resides with friends and religious community. For all people in this stage, religious authority resides mostly outside of them personally.

For teenagers and for many people, God is a confidant, guide, and counselor. God is especially concerned with one's personal moral behavior. God seems to operate behind the scene in social systems, but it is hard to know what is God's activity and what is human activity. Even if teens no longer believe God is a real entity, they will likely attribute these characteristics to the idea of God that others hold.

What do young people need for healthy spiritual formation? What do we need that reflects a similar season in our lives?

### **Scripture**

In facing the joys and challenges of life whether as a teenager or adult of any age, one aspect of spirituality is a sense we are not alone. That God, the Spirit, the Source of Love is with us. And knowing that deeply, we can have courage.

The setting for our passage in Deuteronomy is that the Israelites are perched at the edge of the Promised Land listening to Moses, who has been delivering speeches for what amounts to thirty chapters. Throughout the book of Deuteronomy, he has reiterated the stipulations of the law, peppering it with frequent reminders that when they enter the land, the Israelites must not worship any other gods.

Before our passage from today, Moses makes the choices and the consequences clear. "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in God's ways, and observing commandments, ...then you shall live and the Lord your God will bless you...But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods... you shall perish."

What false gods may we be worshiping with time, money, attention as individuals, as a country and a world? What are the things teenagers may worship and be devoted to? I came

across a powerful quote that gives us some clues. It is by Eugene Peterson (who wrote The Message version of the Bible.)

“The contrast between world and church in this regard is stark: American culture is doing its dead level best with its celebrities, consumerism, and violence to keep us in a perpetually arrested state of adolescence. Yet all the while the church is quietly and without false advertising immersing us in the conditions of becoming mature to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” — Eugene H. Peterson  
*Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up in Christ*

We in the church are invited to resist idols of celebrities, consumerism and violence. Like young people, we need to continue to learn the lesson to turn toward God, toward reaching inward and reaching outward in prayer and action, love and compassion. And to take strength from Moses’s words to the people, "Be strong. Take courage. God right there with you."

I am mindful that teenagers in the last few years have faced particular challenges of isolation during the pandemic. It caused many young people to be cut off from the friends and peer group. They were home trying to learn online. Many young people and young adults have struggled with depression and anxiety. I am praying for resources and am grateful for people in our church and community who continue to help young people process the trauma and work toward healing and resilience. And many have.

One young person I talked with lately said she read her Bible when she was struggling emotionally. And the verses that were particularly helpful to her were the Philippians passage.

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

I am grateful for her and her faith that keeps her open to God’s presence and peace. What can we learn from young people who are taking a few verses from the Bible as a source of strength, peace and presence? Are we forgetting that practice?

The summer always make me think of mission trips I took young people on. My hope was that we would go to various locations and settings. Combine worship, reflection, and service. Take time reflect and celebrate through morning and evening worship. And then notice how they were being transformed by God, returning home ready to meet the needs of their communities. I recently found some notes of one 9<sup>th</sup> grader. This is what he wrote when we went to Atlantic City on a summer mission trip with the youth group in 2011.

This was my first mission trip and I was wondering what to expect. I had a great time helping and having fun in between our service projects. I like cleaning up the beach. I was surprised how much garbage was left on the beach. That is just wrong.

At the Rescue Mission, we worked very hard to feed people for lunch. I washed cucumbers, I peeled cucumbers, I cut cucumbers. And I helped serve pie and cake to the guests. People seemed to appreciate the food and the fact they were treated with respect.

At Sister Jean's Kitchen, we carried plates of food out to the dining room as people came in for lunch. After each group, my job was to be a rag person who wiped off the tables. It was very fast paced. People were expected to eat their lunch very fast so the next group could come in. We served more than 200 people of all ages that day.

I learned that when ordinary people lose their jobs, they can lose their house or apartment and become homeless. They are people who are currently homeless.

I thank God for safe travels for our group and for all God taught me on the mission trip. I know more now about what it means to love my neighbor.

May we encourage young people in our lives and community and remind them they are beloved by God. May we reflect on the ways we are called to resist false idols and seek a deeper spiritual life, a broader empathy that leads to justice and compassion, an awareness of God's peace, and live into a life of joy that says life is an adventure. Amen.