

“Life and faith: it’s a process”

March 30, 2008

Text: 1 Peter 1:3-9, John 20:19-31

I.

One of the lessons in this reading from John’s gospel is that *faith development*, or *coming to faith*, is a process. Put another way: we come to faith in different ways. There’s no instant formula for *faith development* ... for becoming a believer.

Think about your life and your faith-journey; and when you first became a believer, a person of faith ... and think about how your personal sense of your faith has evolved, one way or another, over the years.

We come to faith in different ways, at different times of our lives, with varying levels of commitment and conviction. Indeed, the whole realm of *faith development* is a process. And it’s also so unmistakably personal.

However, having a sense—an understanding—that faith is a process can be liberating.

II.

So often, in our *immediate gratification* culture, we *want what we want* and we want it now. Whether it’s riches or true love or some simple pleasure ... or even faith; we’re not a patient people.

But true wisdom and the deeper gifts and blessings of the spirit don’t work like that. They require time ... and no small amount of human sweat and sacrifice along the way. **Both life and faith are a process.** Success and deeper meanings come over time—in the process of our learning and our growing and *figuring it all out*.

Rolf Benirschke was a kicker for the San Diego Chargers in the 90’s, and eventually ended up in their sports Hall of Fame. However, in his third season with the Chargers he suffered a complete physical collapse, went through two operations, lost sixty pounds and almost didn’t make it.

A key moment in his recovery was when, during a quiet moment one day in the hospital, his mother—who’d been by his side throughout—said to him ... ***It takes little steps to climb a mountain ... and she might have added: and each step matters, one day, one hour, one moment at a time.***

Our lives are a process, friends; and so is our faith. And, again, looking at our lives and our faith in this light can be liberating. Our major moments of transcendence and insight in life don’t just come to us all at once ... at least, not usually. They evolve over time,

working their way in our spirit.

III.

For example, take the disciple **Thomas** in our reading this morning. As John describes Jesus' resurrection appearance to some of the disciples in John 20, **Thomas**, at first, wasn't there.

To those that were there, Jesus appears—however mysteriously—says, *Peace be with you* and then proceeds to show them his hands and his side ... in other words, the nail marks (in his hands) and the spear wound (in his side).

The disciples, obviously, are overjoyed at seeing Jesus. Jesus, then, goes on, saying to them, *As the Father has sent me, so I send you*. Then he breathes on them, saying: *Receive the Holy Spirit ... If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven;; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*.

Thomas missed all of this. For whatever reason, he hadn't been there. Later, when the other disciples see Thomas, they try to explain their experience to him:

We have seen the Lord, they say.

And they probably went on and on about how Jesus had appeared to them and how overjoyed they were ... and so forth. However, it's all a bit too much for **Thomas**. He's not yet ready to believe. He needs more time, more space. He needs time to think things through, perhaps, and, if possible, to *see for himself*.

A week later, Thomas gets a first-hand chance to—indeed—*see for himself* when Jesus appears to them once again. **Thomas** sees ... and he's blown away by the experience, responding immediately to Jesus, **my Lord and my God**.

Thomas *comes to faith*; but in his own time, at his own pace ... more on his own terms. What we're reminded in this is that *faith is personal*. And in many ways, it is private—between us and God. And we all need sufficient space and freedom, therefore, to *come to faith* in ways that are authentic for us.

That's why *freedom of conscience* is such a pillar cornerstone of faith for us in the Mainline churches. We need to be free to work things out for ourselves as the Holy Spirit moves in our lives.

To whatever extent, aren't many of us like **Thomas** in this regard ... needing time and space to sort things through in our faith journey?

Again, it's a process.

IV.

Because our spiritual life is a process, our *believing* and our *coming to faith*, generally, happen over time. Moreover, they don't necessarily have an obvious beginning and end. Again, it's a process. It's not some static place where we arrive with everything all neatly worked out.

What's important in the process is that we give ourselves to it with conviction and passion. We don't need to know where it's going to take us.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, there's a part where the *caterpillar* meets Alice on her *wonderland journey* and says: ***Who are you?***

And she responds: ***Well, I, I hardly know, sir, just at the present. At least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then.***

The point is, our lives are *always* changing, unfolding, evolving, moving towards some end, some purpose. Life, like faith, is a process.

There are times in our lives when—simply put—we have to *do what we have to do* because that's where we are. It may be something as trivial as changing the make of our automobile, say from Toyota to Honda ... or it may be a new hair style ... or something as significant as a career decision or an innovative project at work.

Life is a process ... of sorting things out ... trying this, experimenting with that, trying to figure out who we are along the way. We're not stones.

V.

Another point in all of this is that not only is *life itself a process*, but the process of *living* is what our lives are about. And if we're not careful, we can miss it. We can miss it because, easily, we get stuck on the goal at the end.

We think the *end* or the *goal* is what our lives are about, rather than the process of arriving at the *end* or the *goal*. For example, we say ...

When I get my degree, then my life will be fine ...or, when I get the promotion, then everything will be okay; or, when my children are on their own, raised, grown, out of the house ...or, when I finish the project at work, whatever it is ... then everything will fall in place in my life.

We play that mind game with ourselves, don't we? If we're not careful, we can end up living our lives focused only on the goal, the end game ... not realizing, all along, that what's important is the *process*.

The process, for example, of getting the degree ... the process of gaining the promotion ... the process of raising our children ... the process of finishing the project.

The process is where we struggle and strive and work things out ... to learn ... to grow ... to live out our responsibilities, our duties and commitments. That's our life.

It's about the journey, friends. That's what our lives are about. That's what the popular refrain, **stop and smell the roses** is all about. Smelling the roses is part of the process. And, again, that's our life.

VI.

And our faith, too, is about the process of believing ... and trusting ... and hoping ... and forgiving ... and loving—again and again, day after day.

That's what the early Christians did. Imagine the challenges of being drawn in to the *tug*, the *aura*, the *reality* of believing in the living Christ ... in the one who had appeared to the disciples; the one about whom the scriptures witnessed.

What could that mean?

How could this same *living Christ* be available to later generations of believers ... who had heard the proclamation—**Christ is risen**; and who wanted so very much to believe themselves??

Many in the early Christian faith communities suffered through tough times. All the time, there was a lot to contend with—both outside and inside the faith communities.

Our reading from 1 Peter addresses some of these concerns. Note the initial statement of affirmation from our reading this morning:

Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy, God has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Coming to believe in all of this was a process. It didn't all happen over night. In good faith, people—eager, no doubt to believe—had to sort it out. What did it mean for Jesus to be resurrected from the dead?

VII.

The purpose of 1 Peter from the outset is to encourage the believers in these early faith communities. Again, faith development is a process. And many in these communities needed an encouraging word.

Going on, 1 Peter says, *Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy ... for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.*

They believed ... as we, too, believe. But it's a process. And it's not always an air-tight belief, empty of doubt and wonder in the midst of our sufferings and tribulations.

It takes constant effort on our part. It takes a commitment ... to an active prayer life, to a loving and caring church family where our faith can be nurtured and expanded in the heart of the process. It takes commitment, also, to reaching out to one another in love—particularly the needy and the vulnerable.

In both our life and our faith, when we give ourselves and commit ourselves to the process ... over time, we experience the intimacy and the power of the *new birth* that 1 Peter talks about.

It is a new birth *into an inheritance that is imperishable*, says 1 Peter, *undefiled ... and unfading—kept in heaven for you.*

This is **bible-speak** for the power of God's grace to be alive in our spirit and to direct our spirit towards God's ultimate purposes along the way.

The spirit comes—all the time. And it, too, we experience as a process ... as it works in our mind, heart and spirit ... nudging us, warming our heart, reassuring us, moving us to daily acts of kindness and love ... to the *new birth* in Christ that is *imperishable, undefiled, and unfading ... kept in heaven for you.*

What a faith! What a belief! What a God!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com

