

THE STAGES OF FAITH 2: **“From Agnostics to Apostles”** **Acts 9: 20-31**

In last week's sermon we began this journey on the stages of faith by considering the initial 3 stages; from 'unbeliever' to 'seeker', to 'believer.' In one sense it is difficult to imagine that there is anything more beyond becoming a believer, and one might not be far from the mark to assume that even about us! We place considerable emphasis on people making the decision to become a believer. We speak of it at Baptism; we focus on it with our children. Our youth are always building relationships in the hope that the youth of our community might come to know Jesus Christ. Even into adulthood, you have likely heard me challenge 'us' to make those decisions to accept Jesus and his forgiveness, and yield (surrender) our lives to His Lordship, maybe more than anything else. Last week's message left many of you wondering, 'we're already on the believer stage, and he's got three more to go...'

Let me remind you again with a cautionary word, and a hopeful one too, and then get back to the rest of our scripture story. I must caution 'us' about thinking these steps or stages are neat, orderly, tidy little places of temporary or even terminal residence; no they are often messy and our journey among them is often random. That's ok, as long as my one great hope is always within our grasp, that each of us would discover where we are, and consider God's invitation to move to the next step.

Last week we read of Paul's conversion experience on his way to Damascus. He was an unbeliever when it came to Jesus. His vengeful arresting, and imprisonment of Jesus' followers may have prompted his seeking, certainly his 3 days blind without food and water would have afforded opportunity for seeking, but finally he was given his sight back, and baptized, and accepted (at least by Ananias) as a new believer. Let's pick it up at verse 19:

"Saul stayed with the believers in Damascus for a few days. ²⁰And immediately he began preaching about Jesus in the synagogues, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!" ²¹All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who persecuted Jesus' followers with such devastation in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And we understand that he came here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests.

²²Saul's preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. ²³After a while the Jewish leaders decided to kill him. (Isn't this a fine 'how de do...? First they send him to kill the Christians, now as he preaches to save them, they try to kill him! No wonder Jesus got so upset at their proverbial Phariseism...) ²⁴But Saul was told about their plot, and that they were watching for him day and night at the city gate so they could murder him. ²⁵So during the night, some of the other believers let him down in a large basket through an opening in the city wall.

²⁶When Saul arrived in Jerusalem, he tried to meet with the believers, but they were all afraid of him. They thought he was only pretending to be a believer! ²⁷Then Barnabas brought him to the apostles and told them how Saul had seen the Lord on the way to Damascus. Barnabas also told them what the Lord had said to Saul and how he boldly preached in the name of Jesus in Damascus.

²⁸Then the apostles accepted Saul, and after that he was constantly with them in Jerusalem, preaching boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹He debated with some Greek-speaking Jews, but they plotted to murder him. ³⁰When the believers heard about it, however, they took him to Caesarea and sent him on to his hometown of Tarsus. ³¹The church then had peace throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it grew in strength and numbers. The believers were walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit."

Great story isn't it, and as we fill in the blanks today, we'll try to discover the next three stages of faith, from the life of this great man. As last week, I'll be visiting with you about not only these stages, but the action that is required at each stage, and some events or circumstances that God might use to prompt us to want to move from each stage to the next. Let's look then at stage number 4: from unbeliever, to seeker, to believer...to:

4. STAGE # 4: DISCIPLE

The fourth stage for Christians on their journey to heaven is the Disciple stage. The difference between this stage and the believer stage is largely semantical. For a true Believer is really a true disciple, and vice versa, but for our purposes, and to make some important distinctions, I want to separate these two stages.

The believer who chooses to go on with God becomes a disciple. Even in Jesus life, there were many believers, but only 12 became apostles, and even one of them gave up the journey prematurely. The Apostle Paul's story of conversion seems to skip this stage. It is recorded in Acts that he went over the wall in Damascus, and immediately began preaching, but the record in Galation's mentions something more:

"Then 14 years later I went back to Jerusalem again, this time with Barnabas; and Titus came along too." Gal. 2:1 Most scholars agree the time lapse indicated by this verse actually appeared between verses 25 and 26 of Acts 9, that we just read. In Gal. 1 Paul also mentions that he spent about 3 years with Peter, prior to being finally accepted and commissioned by the Apostles in Jerusalem. I submit to you that these years of silence, after his conversion, before he began preaching in earnest, were indeed his discipleship years. Imagine, a leading Pharisee, a rabbi in training spending 14-17 more years of preparation before he moved to the next steps. (and I thought seminary lasted forever...)

The point is not the length of time, but the act of being and becoming a disciple. Few of us will be afforded the luxury (or curse) of spending 14 years in training, though it's probably a good reminder that our training never really ends! And it ought to be noted that that training is often not easy! Each successive stage comes with a greater deal of difficulty, and the cost must be considered. Let's think about the action required at this stage:

Action required at this stage: **GROWTH.**

For the record, there is no microwave approach to discipleship; there is no such thing as instant spiritual maturity. I know some of our young people are deeply spiritual, and mature beyond their ages, but there is plain and simple no education better than life itself!

That being said, I want to encourage you, if you find yourself on the believer stage, and stuck there...you have to make a decision to begin or continue to grow. Some of you have not used your minds to ponder spiritual things for many years; it's time!!! Some of you have not availed yourself of any opportunity to expand or grow your relationship for many years. You're stuck on the believer stage. We have classes and groups and studies aplenty, that would reawaken your passion to grow deeper faith and get to know God better. Which leads to a couple events/circumstances that might prompt that move from believer to Disciple:

Some people simply wanting greater **PERSONAL FULFILMENT** opt for increased learning and growing, and some people whom God is **PREPARATING FOR SERVICE**, know they need to be better prepared before embarking. This is an important stage, and many of us need to be willing to sacrifice the security of our salvation for the adventure of growing deeper with God, it's what being a disciple is all about.

Before I get to the last two stages, I want to insert a parenthesis. Most people, who move beyond the discipleship stage, do so because they 'hit the wall.' I'm talking about the fact, that somewhere between the 4th and 5th stages, there comes some life altering experience, that prompts or produces the willingness, even desire, to go further with God. This is not a natural experience,...it is supernatural. People, even good people, disciples, don't wade into the deep end accidentally; they only get here intentionally. When you hear the stages, see if you don't agree.

5. THE FIFTH STAGE: STEWARD

There is a 5th stage on our advancement to heaven that few reach, and though it involves our money, that is only a small part of it! This stage is defined by people who understand, and continually evolve toward a lifetime, and a lifestyle, and a life marked by faithful stewardship of ALL God's resources entrusted to them.

We don't see this directly in our story from Paul's adventurous journey, but we see the result in his life! He literally spends the rest of his life in the work of the kingdom. He also gives us great teaching in numerous of his writings about this life of stewardship. Here is one example:

"Since you excel in so many ways – in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love for us – I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving." 2 Corinthians 8:7

Do you recognize that verse from somewhere? You should, ...it's printed on each of your envelopes! Shame on you if you never noticed!

The action required at this stage: is pretty obvious isn't it: **GIVING.** Again, as important as the giving of money is to our spiritual wellbeing, this is not just another August appeal for more money in the plates. This stage is defined by people who willfully acknowledge that all they have, and all they are, are gifts from God. It is defined by people who willfully acknowledge that all their possessions, even their children, are on loan from God, and must be available to the owner, whenever He might request them. This stage is defined by people who choose to view life as renters, not owners, and this stage is not reserved, let me say this again, this stage is not reserved only for people who have large amounts of money or resources!

God is seeking from among His disciples, some who would answer the challenge to become stewards, and invest all their resources in the advancement of His kingdom. God is seeking from among His disciples, those who have been learning for years, to become teachers! Some of you have been in Bible Study for 25 years, your feasting on the Word is no longer making you holy, it's just making you FAT, it's time to exercise some of that wisdom and knowledge. Barb needs you in children's ministry, Pete needs you investing in our youth, our adult Sunday School department is always looking to begin new classes, and who would answer a call to begin a new class for all those parents who have had new babies in the last 3 months???

Before I really start preaching, we better consider what event or circumstance God might use to prompt us to move to this stage, for I believe this room today is filled with people needing, and even wanting to move to this stage: There are three circumstances that I can think of:

- a- **A LOVE FOR THE LORD**
- b- **A PASSION FOR MEETING PEOPLE'S NEEDS**
- c- **A BELIEF IN THE VISION AND MISSION**

I read it again this week: People give regularly to budgets, and people give generously to building buildings, but people give sacrificially to Visions that impact people. Let that define FUMC's stewards!

6. STAGE # 6: APOSTLE

The last stage on our steps toward heaven is the Apostle. Some people believe there were only 12 apostles, lost one with Judas, gained one with Paul, and there are no more. I disagree. The word apostle simply and literally means 'one sent forth'; one sent out on behalf of another, representing another, fulfilling the will of another. God is the other, and we are called, all of us, to this ultimate stage of being an apostle.

The word apostle also carries within its definition, a hint of what we would call a missionary, especially a missionary who crosses cultures. Now think of this. Is there any more necessary time than right now for the Body of Christ to up the ante as it concerns our winning and reaching our 'culture' for Christ? Bill Easum has coined a new phrase that is gaining acceptance in church circles. Instead of the popular term used to describe our current culture; "Post-Modern", he advocates that actually we are living... again, in a "Pre-Christian" world. Think about that for a second. If it is true, and I think it might be, the conditions of the 21st century more closely reflect what life was like on this planet early in the 1st Century, than at any other time, in our history.

The need is obvious. The church of Jesus Christ, and the kingdom of God, have no greater need right now than for men and women, young and old, to answer the call to apostleship that God lays before each of us. A seminary degree is not required; a theological or biblical education is not required. Neither wealth, nor intelligence, nor status, nor power are prerequisites.

There is one action required though at this last stage, and you probably have already guessed it: Yes: **OBEDIENCE**

My friends, I'm not going to stand up here and say that unless you are winsomely sharing your faith with co-workers, family members, and especially strangers, you are living in disobedience. But I will say that this stage is not unreachable for any of us! It simply takes obedience. That's what has so thrilled me about Barb and Dave Nash, and the whole Ghana student effort. Their rather ordinary and respectable lives took a dramatic turn when Barbara ventured to handicap camp, then to Ghana, then to Guatemala and most recently to China. They have simply learned to be obedient, and it's not always easy, is it?

There are a couple events or circumstances that might prompt you and me to be willing to be made willing to move to this stage; first would be a **PASSION FOR THE LOST**, secondly, a **DESIRE TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD**. (A consuming desire.) Apostles represent another, and share that 'sender's' values, and passion and love for a lost and dying world.

We have often spoken about making a difference in the world, but I think Apostles of Jesus Christ in the 21st Century in Bismarck ND must begin to think differently. I think it's time we begin to think less about making a difference in the world, and more about making the world different!

Think of what the apostles did in their life times! Think of how our city, our community, our state, our nation, and yes, even our world might be different, if every person sitting in a pew this morning were fully committed to being an Apostle of Jesus Christ!

There is no way guilt will lead you to seek this stage, nor would that be smart. But I am not going to let you out of here without giving you every opportunity to step up to that next stage before you.

If you are here this morning and have yet to surrender your life to God, that is where you must begin. If you are a believer, but stuck there either willfully or by default, then make a commitment to get growing. If you've been a disciple, a follower, a learner for some time, it's time to become a steward, with your money, your talent, your time, your resources, your gifts, and your life. And if you are ready, God needs more apostles, more ambassadors. You don't have to worry about a Senate confirmation hearing, you just have to say yes, and obediently...follow...Jesus.

Jesus was gathered with the "big shots" when he shortly returned to heaven. Moses was there, Abraham was there, David, and Daniel and Elijah and Jeremiah all sat around the conference table. They asked him how it had gone down here on earth for those 33 years. Jesus remarked how he had invested his life in 12 fishermen and tax collectors; how many crowds had followed him, how many had received his miracles. They asked how it ended, and how he left things to finish God's original plan. Jesus replied, "Well, I've left 11 men to carry on the work each of us began." There was a stunned silence; you could almost see the wheels turning as each 'faith giant' weighed what each of them had invested, and especially what Jesus had done on the cross. Finally it was Job who asked...what each of them was thinking... "What if it doesn't work, what if your plan fails, what if the 11 don't get the job done?" There was a long pause, and finally Jesus spoke: "I don't have any other plan."

We are his plan, to become believers, disciples, stewards and apostles. We are his plan, and we must not fail. Let us pray!

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4. STAGE # 4: _____

Action required at this stage: _____

Event/Circumstance God might use to prompt us to move to this stage:

_____ or

5. THE FIFTH STAGE: _____

Action required at this stage: _____

Event/Circumstance God might use to prompt us to move to this stage:

- a- A _____ for the Lord
- b- A _____ for meeting people’s needs
- c- A _____ in the Vision and Mission

6. STAGE # 6: _____

Action required at this last stage: _____

Event/Circumstance that God might use to prompt us to move to this stage:

- a _____ for the Lost.
- a _____ to Transform the World.