

“The Journey of Life: Middle Adults”

Luke 14:15-25 ¹

After playing in marching bands for ten years in my younger days, I’ve done my share of halftime shows. My very favorite halftime was during my senior year in high school, when I was the first-chair trumpet and my best friend was the drum major. We were playing *Oklahoma*, and we were supposed to be making an oil derrick on the field . . . except what we made didn’t look like an oil derrick at all.

As the drum major, my friend was on an elevated platform where he could see how awful we looked, and he started laughing. When I saw him start laughing, I got tickled. It’s very hard to play the trumpet while you’re laughing, and when the rest of the trumpet section saw the first-chair quit playing, they thought something was up, so they all stopped, too. Our band director was absolutely furious when we got back into the stands!

The purpose of halftime at a game, of course, is to give the teams a chance to catch their breath and for their coaches to make course corrections based on how the game has gone so far. Halftime shows are really just fillers to help fans pass the time while those things happen.

This morning, as we come to mid-life adulthood, we come to the “halftime” season of life which is infamous for course corrections known as “mid-life crises.” Mid-life crises are seasons of varying length that make their appearance at varying times—mine was in my early thirties.

As I’m sure you know, the dynamic of mid-life crises has to do with our realizing with a jolt that our lives are more or less half over, and when we then compare how our lives are actually going with how we thought they’d go, we often find ourselves catapulted into an existential crisis of fairly major proportions.

People’s responses to mid-life crisis are quite varied. While some of the stereotypical responses happen often enough in real life to fuel the stereotypes, not everyone expresses this crisis in such dramatic ways, and some persons don’t have noticeable mid-life crises at all.

Last week we considered the question, “*What are you doing with your life?*” and mid-life crises and mid-life course corrections are really responses to this question or to something very similar. Stephen Covey once interviewed a Type-A fellow who lamented, “I’m running hard all day long. I push myself to the limit, fall into bed exhausted, and get up early the next morning to do it all again. My output is tremendous; but I get this feeling inside sometimes, ‘*So what? What are you doing that really counts?*’ And I have to admit that *I don’t know.*”²

Several years ago I had the opportunity to visit an optical engineering company whose secret pioneering work was expected to lead to both fame and wealth. I asked one of the engineers what the point of it all was: “Once you get past making things smaller, faster, and more powerful, and once you’ve become insanely wealthy by doing so, what’s it all really about?” The engineer thought

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on March 23, 2014. Much of the developmental information in this sermon comes from one or more of the following sources: Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987); Donald Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care*, Theology & Pastoral Care Series, ed. Don. S. Browning (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959, reprinted 1980); James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Robert Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: David McKay Co., 1972); and Lewis Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

² Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Rebecca Merrill, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), p. 17.

about that for a moment and then he answered, “It’s better not to ask such questions.” That’s actually what he said.

A missionary pondered this question of significance and concluded that “Our greatest fear should not be of *failure*, but of *succeeding* at something that doesn’t really matter.”³ If you’ve made it to the middle years, I’ll bet you’ve discovered that it’s awfully easy to get caught up “in the thick of thin things,” living with the uneasy sense that what we’re doing with our lives is only getting us to the wrong place faster.⁴ That’s the dynamic that underlies the existential crisis of mid-life.

At some point during our forties or fifties, most of us crash land into the realization that the future is no longer limitless. Most of us realize with a start that we’re not ever going to be rich, famous, Pulitzer Prize winners, Nobel Laureates, or Olympic Champions, and we feel a growing sense of panic when we stop to think that once we’ve stopped “growing up,” we’ve begun “growing old.”

At some point during the years from 40-65, we realize that we really have left youth behind, that our physical strength and endurance are measurably declining, and that our bodies are showing evidence of wear, tear, and abuse. For most of us, nearly every relationship that has shaped our lives will be tested, altered, or permanently lost during our middle adult years.⁵ We may lose our mates to death or divorce. We may lose our children to war or disease. And we may discover that the goals that have energized and directed our lives thus far have been badly mistaken.

As life expectancies grow longer and longer, middle adults increasingly find themselves “sandwiched” between care for their boomerang children and care for their aging parents. And when this is combined with all the other challenges I’ve mentioned, middle adults can find themselves overtaken by depression, anxiety, and a host of other psychosomatic evidences of these internal struggles. Feeling better yet?

Well, don’t despair. While the middle adult years certainly do have their challenges, they have many joys and rewards as well, and, as one who’s at the tail end of middle adulthood, I can tell you that the middle adult years have been the most fun years of my life!

Let’s look, then, at our template of positive and negative polarities, deadly sins and saving virtues, after which I want to say a word or two about faith, marriage, and meaning in the middle years.

As the developmental process continues to transition from love that receives to love that gives, the **positive polarity** of middle adulthood is **generativity**—a passionate concern for establishing, encouraging, and guiding the next generation. Although generativity is often connected to child-bearing, child-rearing, and grandparenting, generativity certainly isn’t limited to these. Generativity is the work of any adults who are able to see beyond the preoccupations and interests of their own lives and their own generation such that they begin to focus their lives on the needs of the generations after them.⁶

On the other hand, adults in the prime of life who don’t become generative and life-giving become stagnant and life-destroying. The **negative polarity** of middle adulthood is **stagnation**,

³ Unknown New Tribes Missionary, *Eternal Perspectives* (Fall 2003), 15.

⁴ Covey, pp. 20, 25.

⁵ James Hightower, ed. and contributor, *Caring for Folks from Birth to Death* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985), p. 100.

⁶ Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory*, p. 28.

and it involves the loss of desire for or the lack of inner motivation to perform acts of care and nurture for others, particularly the generations following. Persons who reach mid-life with a deficit of selfhood from previous stages find themselves having little to give to others. Desperately trying to fill their own inner emptiness, these adults tend to become self-absorbed, pampering themselves rather than contributing to the common good. I've had kinfolk who played that game, and you may have, as well.

Not surprisingly, given the negative polarity of stagnation, the **deadly sin** of middle adulthood is **sloth**, which has to do with the inability to relate meaningfully to the world around us.⁷ Stagnant adults are unable to experience genuine care for others, and the more they become accustomed to not caring, the more difficult caring becomes. Stagnant and slothful adults become more and more focused on themselves as their own infants and pets . . . and you've probably noticed that persons all wrapped up in themselves make pretty small packages.

If the deadly sin of middle adulthood is sloth, the **saving virtue** of middle adulthood is **care**. While the caring of mid-life obviously involves caring for and about the younger generations who are moving quickly onto center stage, this caring also involves "the transmission of valued legacies and achievements of our own and previous generations."⁸ The care of mid-life is not just for persons, but also for the legacies of heritage and faith that we ourselves have inherited; and that care involves the preparation of younger generations so that they're equipped to become custodians of these legacies in turn.

For those of us who are married, one of the primary centers of our care in middle adulthood is our relationship with our mate. Indeed, there is a fairly predictable life-cycle to marriage even as there is to life itself, and because describing the marital life-cycle is a bit complicated, I'm going to write about that in this week's *Laptop* as I did with "moratorium" last week. Since we'll save thinking about marriage for later, let's move on to consider the faith of mid-life.

When we consider faith development in middle adulthood, you'll remember from last week's sermon and *Laptop* that most of us spend middle adulthood in what James Fowler called "Mythic-Literal Faith," "Synthetic-Conventional Faith," or "Individuative-Reflective Faith."⁹ I'm not going to go over those again now, but you may want to keep those summaries for future reference.

As mid-life progresses, a few of us move beyond Stage 4's Individuative-Reflective Faith into the fifth stage of "Conjunctive Faith," which involves the integration of much that was suppressed or unrecognized in previous stages. As I mentioned last week, Conjunctive Faith brings the birth of a "second naïveté" that leads to increased curiosity and openness to the discovery that "all truth is God's truth."

Conjunctive Faith involves becoming open to the voice of one's "deeper Self" and its unconscious processes, together with a new reworking and reclaiming of one's life to this point. Conjunctive Faith also involves coming to grips with the myths, ideals, and prejudices built deeply into our character by virtue of having grown up within a particular social class, religious tradition, or ethnic group.

Unusual before mid-life, Conjunctive Faith grows best in the soil of brokenness. Conjunctive Faith knows what it means to have made irrevocable commitments and to have acted in irrevocable ways, for both good and ill; and, whereas the central task of Stage 4 was to create sufficient

⁷ Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 69.

⁸ Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 107.

⁹ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

boundaries around the Self to *have* a sense of Self, the central task of Stage 5 is to allow those same boundaries to now become permeable to that which is and to those who are “other.”

Persons who move into Conjunctive Faith have developed sufficient self-certainty and spiritual anchoring to acknowledge that Reality is more complex than any single theory can account for or that any system of belief can grasp. With this awareness comes a new capacity to see and to gladly serve the meanings of one’s own faith while recognizing that those meanings are inevitably partial and somewhat relative apprehensions of transcendent things.

As a part of this movement, Conjunctive Faith moves beyond the confines of class, tribe, religion and nation to seek real justice and hope for all people. And with the seriousness that comes with the second half of life, Conjunctive Faith is ready to spend and be spent for the cause of making abundant life possible for others just as much as we desire such life for ourselves.

If our lives remain deeply and vitally grounded in personal relationship with God through all these changes, we discover toward the end of middle adulthood that the accumulated pain of life has somehow found redemption in the deep places of our spirits. We find ourselves turning away from the anxious accumulation of accelerating achievements and discovering the blessing of receiving with gratitude the gift that each day really is.

As God’s work of grace continues in our hearts, our accumulated losses begin to find their healing in surrender to the gracious and loving purposes of God. Our nagging guilt over life’s many failures is washed clean by the flood of forgiveness that flows from Calvary. And as all these transformations near their completion, we find that our lives have become renewed in a Hope that does not disappoint us, either in time or in eternity.

Well, let’s return to our text for a moment and then we’ll be done. Our text this morning has two dimensions that orbit a common center. The text begins and ends with Jesus’ affirmation of the cost of discipleship—“*Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples*” (Luke 14:33)—and between those affirmations, Jesus spoke of a tower that stood half-finished because its builder failed to accurately estimate what it would take to build it.

That tower brings us to what is really the core question for mid-life adults. Your Life’s Dream may not have anything at all to do with building a building. Life Dreams can take many shapes. But here’s The Question: **What’s the condition of your Dream today?**

Whether our passion is money or property or power or influence or even a good golf game, **our lives tend to quite dependably produce what our hearts yearn for more than anything else.** The great preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, called this effect the “Prayer of Dominant Desire,” by which he meant that most of the time, no matter what we say our Life Goals are, our lives *produce* what we *actually* do desire with all our hearts. So, as you compare what your life has produced thus far to the commitment with which you first followed Jesus, do those trajectories match?

Does the spiritual “building” that represents your obedience to Jesus stand completed at least to the point where you find yourself in life, or does it stand half finished next to something you’ve built *for yourself*? Has your obedience to Jesus been diluted or abandoned because of its cost in social status, time, or wealth? Have you said to Jesus, “I’ll follow you this far, but no farther?”

The truth of the matter is that during our middle adult years, we live our lives “on center stage.” We’re the “movers and shakers.” We’re at the peak of our personal power and influence. So if you’re a middle adult this morning, what do you need to do about all that?

Are you investing the most powerful years of your life in something that has eternal significance, or are you spending money you don't have to buy things you don't need to impress people you don't like? Is that really how you want the game to go?

It's halftime. If you're a middle adult, what kinds of course corrections and recommitments do you need to make? If God put a dream in your heart long ago and that dream has become neglected and encrusted with life's mud and dust, what do you need to do *now*? And if you've never even *asked* God for a dream, for a challenge, for a "Mission Impossible" that only God could cause to happen through your life, why not ask for that challenge today?

Last week I quoted Frederick Buechner's wonderful line that "neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. *The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.*"¹⁰ It's time to dream again, my friends. **It's time to dream again!**

¹⁰Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95. ["God's will for my life won't be anything I enjoy doing."]