

# “The Journey of Life: Young Adults”

Matthew 19:16-24 <sup>1</sup>

Well, with this third examination of the spiritual dimensions of the human life-cycle we’re approaching the “hump” of the cycle in years 18-40, which we’ll call “Young Adulthood.” Having made our way through the developmental stages whose goals are “to get and to give in return,” “to hold on and to let go,” “to ‘go after’ things and persons,” “to make things,” and “to be somebody,” we turn our attention now to learning to “be with others” in new and deeper ways.<sup>2</sup>

We’ve noted in previous weeks that each stage builds upon the strengths of the previous stages and is hampered by the failures of those same stages. And we’ve noted that the whole idea of adolescence is an artifact of industrial cultures in which most people no longer make a living from farming and animal husbandry.

In young adulthood we encounter another such post-industrial artifact, that of “the boomerang generation,”<sup>3</sup> an increasing phenomenon in which young adults move away from home and then, before too long, move back. Such “boomeranging” is partly related to delayed development of some of the life skills we’ll talk about this morning, but it’s also partly related to the changing economic realities of life in America these days, changes that often make it significantly harder for the children of boomers to “float their boats” and “make a living” than it was for their parents to do these things.

Not all young adults “boomerang,” of course. Some have the good fortune to make the necessary connections to secure sufficient employment and launch their lives, and some don’t “boomerang” because they never left home in the first place. As Lewis Sherrill put it many years ago, “It should be seen as a symptom of the sickness of a society if that society becomes so complex and so terrifying that the young lose heart for growing up and prefer instead to remain protected even at the cost of being dominated by parents or parental substitutes.”<sup>4</sup>

There are in fact a number of inner struggles these days that contribute to ambivalence about “growing up.” Some of the most frequent struggles are these:

1. The struggle between the desire to know oneself over against the fear of discovering only emptiness inside;

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on March 16, 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*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: David McKay Co., 1972); and Lewis Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

<sup>2</sup> Stage One: INFANCY (0-1) – “to get and to give in return”  
Stage Two: EARLY CHILDHOOD (1-3) – “to hold on and to let go”  
Stage Three: PLAY AGE (3-5) – “to ‘go after’ things or persons”  
Stage Four: SCHOOL AGE (5-12) – “to make things”  
Stage Five: ADOLESCENCE (12-18) – “to be somebody”  
Stage Six: YOUNG ADULTHOOD (18-40) – “to be with others”  
Stage Seven: ADULTHOOD (40-65) – “to take care of others”  
Stage Eight: MATURE ADULTHOOD (65+) – “to be, through having been”

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boomerang\\_Generation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boomerang_Generation)

<sup>4</sup> Sherrill, p. 111.

2. The struggle between the desire to know oneself over against the fear of finding that one is very much like one's parents;
3. The struggle between the desire for safety and security over against the desire to accomplish great things;
4. The struggle between the desire to be self-sufficient over against the desire to be taken care of;
5. The struggle between the desire to experience intimacy over against the desire to protect one's inner Self;
6. The struggle between the desire to respect oneself over against the desire to feel sorry for oneself; and finally,
7. The struggle between the desire to get revenge for perceived wrongs during our growing-up years over against the desire to forgive and to move on.<sup>5</sup>

That's quite a lot of struggle, isn't it? Young adulthood is a crucial, direction-setting stage of life, and if we apply our template of positive and negative polarities, deadly sins and saving virtues, and life-giving blessings to this stage of the life-cycle, here are some of the things we find:

**The Positive Polarity:** The epigenetic principle—the idea that each stage builds upon the previous stages—is evident again in this sixth stage, because interpersonal **intimacy**, the **positive polarity** of this stage, is hardly possible without a reasonable sense of identity and selfhood, the achievement of which were the tasks of adolescence.<sup>6</sup> And because it is absolutely essential to *have* a Self in order to *share* that Self in intimate emotional and spiritual relationship, it's far more important in late adolescence and early adulthood to **be** the right kind of person to be in intimate relationship than it is to **find** the right kind of person with whom to be in such relationship. This is a reality that our culture seldom understands.

**The Negative Polarity:** The opposite of intimacy is **isolation**, which is the **negative polarity** of young adulthood. If we don't have an adequately clear and sufficiently sturdy sense of Self, the prospect of being in relationship with others is quite frightening, and so, rather than risking such threatening relationships, young people choose varying kinds and degrees of isolation from others. Substance abuse is one frequent means by which such isolation is secured.

**The Deadly Sin:** Because our culture is so desperately confused about these matters, young adults frequently confuse sexual involvement with real intimacy, and the **Deadly Sin** that grows out of this confusion is **lust**. Persons without a secure sense of Self may throw themselves into sexual promiscuity, which is sexual activity without the deep commitment that is necessary for true intimacy to be experienced.

Lust is actually a near cousin to gluttony, because lust is not really interested in its partners as persons at all. Lust is only interested in the appeasement of an essentially unappeasable appetite, and, rather than achieving real intimacy, what lust accomplishes instead is the progressive dissolution of whatever sense of Self there might have been. Indeed, there seems to be a somewhat linear relationship between sexual acting out and a lack of capacity for intimacy.<sup>7</sup>

**The Saving Virtue:** In counterpoint to lust, the **Saving Virtue** of young adulthood is **love**. Although love is a part of all that it means to be human, love becomes particularly significant at this stage of life, because young adulthood is the season in which we best transition from love that

<sup>5</sup> Marianne Schneider Corey and Gerald Corey, *Groups: Process and Practice*, 3rd ed. (Pacific Grove, California: Brooks/Cole, 1987), pp. 335-336.

<sup>6</sup> While our culture conditions us to think of "sexuality" when we hear the word, "intimacy," these concepts are most emphatically not the same thing, as we'll see in a moment with the deadly sin of this stage.

<sup>7</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, pp. 52-53.

takes and receives to love that gives and sacrifices. Such “Gift love” is characterized by *exclusivity* (we choose to give it to a particular person), *responsibility* (faithfulness and integrity), and *mutuality* (shared respect and care). Love that meets the deepest needs of our spirits often takes the shape of an experience in which two separate identities, successfully formed in the previous stage, now come together so that “*the two become one*” (Genesis 3:24).<sup>8</sup>

While many, and perhaps most, of us, experience love of this kind most fully in the relationship of marriage, it’s important to point out that being in a marriage relationship is most certainly not essential to experiencing the fullness of love, either with God or with other persons. One is not a fraction. One is a “whole” number. Jesus, Paul, and many of those who have been closest to God and were used most powerfully by God across the centuries have not been married.

One person is a whole person, and one person is quite able to be a family, to be what the Bible calls a “household.” While God apparently does intend for most of us to be married, we need to remind ourselves that all persons are of equal value in the household of God, whether we are married or not.<sup>9</sup>

Before we look at some of the life-giving blessings appropriate to young adulthood, I want to look for a few moments at the faith transition most appropriate for young adulthood and then at the idea of “vocation.” With rare exceptions, every one of us spends our lives in one or more of four “faith stages.” These stages are “Mythic-Literal Faith,” “Synthetic-Conventional Faith,” “Individuative-Reflective Faith,” and “Conjunctive Faith.”<sup>10</sup>

While we can become stuck in any of these early stages of faith and spend the rest of our lives in that arrested development, “Mythic-Literal Faith” is really the faith of childhood, “the Age of Story.” “Synthetic-Conventional Faith” is really the faith of adolescence, “the Age of Conformity.” “Individuative-Reflective Faith” is the faith to which we best transition in young adulthood, “the Age of Self-Discovery.” And “Conjunctive Faith,” the faith of our mature years, seldom begins to develop until young adulthood is nearly over. We’ll look at that one next week.

**Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith (ages 13-30+)** As I suggested last week, the transition from the faith of adolescence into the faith of young adulthood is most frequently precipitated in our culture by leaving home to go to college, to serve in the military, or to go to work. This transition can also be precipitated by the death of a parent or by other dramatic changes in primary relationships.

While the transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 faith happens most appropriately during the young adult years, many people never make this transition at all, and some do not experience it

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<sup>8</sup> Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 101.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the developmental tasks of young adulthood are these:

1. Becoming Competent
2. Achieving Autonomy
3. Developing and Implementing Values
4. Forming an Identity
5. Integrating Sexuality into Life
6. Making Friends and Developing Intimacy
7. Loving and Making a Commitment to another Person
8. Making Initial Job or Career Choices
9. Becoming an Active Community Member & Citizen
10. Learning How to Use Leisure Time

Gerard Egan and Michael A. Cowan, *Moving into Adulthood* (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole, 1980), p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> The primary source by which to explore these concepts further is James Fowler’s *Stages of Faith*.

until their middle adult years. Whenever it occurs, successful navigation of this transition requires two sequential steps: (1) the undermining or the interruption of reliance on external sources of authority; and (2) the relocation of authority within the Self.<sup>11</sup> One way to describe this change is that the God of my parents becomes MY God.

Both of these steps are essential, because to undermine or interrupt external sources of authority without a corresponding relocation of authority within one's own Self results in a cynical, listless withdrawal from engagement in life, technically known as *anomie*. We unfortunately see rather a lot of that these days.

The transition from Stage 3 to Stage 4 can take 5-7 years to accomplish, and this transition is best understood as a period of "moratorium" during which significant metamorphosis occurs. The idea of spiritual moratorium is more complex than I can explain here, but I'll make that explanation in this week's *Laptop*.

The Stage 3/Stage 4 Transition is a truly crucial stage for human development, because it is in this transformation that we begin to take seriously the burden of our responsibility for our own commitments, lifestyle, attitudes, and beliefs. Having been previously defined by a sense of our Selves that grows out of our reflected perceptions of others' perceptions of us, as we move into Stage 4 we begin to come to grips with some of the necessary tensions of adulthood:

- Developing our own individuality vs. being defined by a group or group membership;
- Reflecting critically on our own feelings and values vs. allowing unexamined feelings and values to continue to define us;
- Becoming concerned about service to and for others vs. remaining focused on our own selfish interests and pleasures; and
- Deciding for ourselves what we regard as Truth that has genuine claim on us vs. hiding behind our culture's rejection of anything that is always and everywhere True.

As these changes take place, young adulthood is a particularly strategic time for the moral demands of a holy God to confront the human soul, especially in the case of those who are mature enough to understand the meaning of these demands but not yet so deeply mired in lesser commitments that they become unwilling to obey.<sup>12</sup> And that brings us to consideration of a matter that will be of considerable interest for the remainder of our journey—the question of "vocation."

You've heard me say many times that the human heart yearns for two things, and for two things only. All of our other desires are contained within **our longing for a life that matters** and **our yearning for relationships that last**. These two impulses dance together most vigorously in the season of young adulthood.

My friend, Steve Hadden, noted that the world is forever asking "What do you do?" which is really the wrong question. The real question is "**What are you doing with your life?**" And most of us don't know how to answer that question. We really don't *know* what we're doing with our lives.<sup>13</sup>

**The question of what we're doing with our lives is the question of vocation.** "Vocation" is derived from the Latin *vocare* ("to call") and *vocatio* ("call" or "calling"). Another friend, Mark Jensen, has argued that the idea of "vocation" for a Christian has to do with "our commitment to

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<sup>11</sup> Another way to describe this is as a shift from an *external* locus-of-control" to an *internal* locus-of-control.

<sup>12</sup> Sherrill, p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen L. Hadden, "A Vocation Clarification Seminar for College Students at Faith Baptist Church, Georgetown, Kentucky" (D.Min. project, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1987), p. 12.

a way of life that seeks to follow Jesus.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, vocation is not so much a matter of “actualizing one’s potential” or of “doing one’s own thing” (though it does include an element of these) as it is “doing the thing that [God has] given to us to do.”<sup>15</sup>

I suspect that we could suggest many things as contenders for “that thing which [God has] given to us to do.” Most Christians would probably agree that the call to follow Jesus and to have one’s life transformed by Him is the fundamental element in vocation. Perhaps nearly as many Christians would agree with the corollary that our vocation in Christ “is to love and be loved. It is that simple. It is that hard.”<sup>16</sup>

But even though we might agree that our vocation in Christ is “to love and be loved,” I wonder how many of us, when asked about our sense of vocation, would use the verbs *love* and *enjoy* somewhere in the first couple of sentences? I fear that we may be more likely to answer such a question with serious faces and perplexed looks rather than with smiles of love and enjoyment.

But the fact of the matter is that God has called us to an enduring relationship of love and joy. The Bible tells us that “*God is love. . . . We love because he first loved us*” (1 John 4:16, 19). And while Baptists have not been much into catechetical instruction, it helps me to remember that the very first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism go like this:

What is the chief end of mankind?

**The chief end of mankind is to love God and to enjoy Him forever.**<sup>17</sup>

This glad vocation is offered to every person: that we accept God’s gracious gift of intimate relationship with Christ and that we then live out our days in joyful fellowship and partnership with Him. Paul told us that the vocation of Christians is to be reconciled with God, and then to become agents of God’s reconciliation in the world (2 Corinthians 5:19); and this vocation is to be central in our lives, not peripheral or tangential. Our *whole lives* are to be centered on a purpose for living that is joined with the eternal purposes of God.

Vocation is a gift from God, and God’s offer of vocation is a gracious response to our deep need for “a life that matters.” Vocation involves the awareness that there are purposes in the universe larger than our own and that our lives can contribute to them.<sup>18</sup> The answer to “what we are doing with our lives” is focused at this point: that our lives are grounded in eternity. God has graciously invited us to help move Creation toward its appointed end.

And, while we sometimes think about “God’s will for our lives” as an elusive reality for which we have to search with a certain measure of desperation, I find it much more helpful to think of “vocation” as being more a matter of “being found” than it is of “finding.” Persons who focus their energies on “finding” their vocation tend to be more serious than joyful, experiencing God’s call as demand and seeing God’s work in the world as being largely dependent on their own effort and labor.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mark Jensen, *Shattered Vocations*, The Bible and Personal Crisis, ed. Edward E. Thornton (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Beverly R. Gaventa, “The Scandal of Vocation,” *Christian Ministry*, 14 (July 1983), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Jensen, *Shattered Vocations*, p. 68.

<sup>17</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster\\_Shorter\\_Catechism;www.shortercatechism.com/resources/wsc/wsc\\_001.html](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Shorter_Catechism;www.shortercatechism.com/resources/wsc/wsc_001.html)

<sup>18</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., *A Christian Natural Theology: Based on the Thought of Alfred North Whitehead* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), p. 132.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Thornton, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 106.

On the other hand, persons who perceive themselves to “have been found” by God are more likely to experience a sense of God’s love and acceptance. Such persons tend to be spontaneous, joyful, flexible, creative, emotionally honest, and genuinely loving. Rather than serving God “with their noses to the grindstone,” such persons live in the wonder and gladness of seeing God’s Spirit at work in the world through their lives.

Understood as “being found” rather than as “finding,” vocation is much less burdensome, because we need not live in terror of missing the one spot that was God’s plan for our lives. Indeed, I suggest to you that genuine vocation is not so much “a spot” as it is a “pilgrimage,” a “journey.” Vocation involves a sense of God’s call that gives unity to the many “spots” through which we pass on the way to the Eternal Kingdom.<sup>20</sup>

Defined as the journey itself rather than the waystations along the path, vocation provides a power that sustains us through the differing roles we experience in the journey of life.<sup>21</sup> Frederick Buechner suggested that such vocation is able to help us meet our own deep needs for fulfillment (relationships that last) while we also meet the deep needs of others (a life that matters), writing 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.**”<sup>22</sup> Isn’t that good?

Well, as we wrap up our look at young adulthood, here are some **life-giving blessings** appropriate for this stage of the journey:

- “I really like the person you’re becoming.”
- “It’s okay to build a life that is uniquely your own.”
- “While our life together has had its ups and downs, know that my love for you is durable and sure.”
- “The most important thing for now is to become a person who is truly ready to join your life with another’s.”
- “If Jesus is your Way, you’ll never be lost. If Jesus is your Truth, you’ll never be deceived. And if Jesus is your Life, you’ll never live in fear.”
- “God has created you to make a difference for Good in the world.”

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<sup>20</sup>Jensen, *Shattered Vocations*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Jensen offered a metaphor that I find very helpful in this regard:

“The role or job that we occupy at a given time is the *furniture* that we place upon the foundation of vocation. It is the chair we sit in, but it rests on a foundation that supports the whole house. Certainly some chairs are more comfortable than others. Some mean a lot to us because they have been passed on to us from another generation. Some suit our tastes better than others or fit with the rest of the furniture in the house. Some we might have built ourselves. But it is still furniture.

“Furniture can be moved. From time to time we might decide to rearrange a living room. That does not change the fact that it is a living room, nor does it change the foundation on which the house rests. Few of us nail our furniture to the floor or anchor it in a concrete foundation. We rest comfortably in it because we feel secure resting on a foundation that is secure.

“From time to time we might even decide to get new furniture. Sometimes even favorite chairs and sofas wear out and need to be recovered or discarded. It may be hard for us to do because we liked the old furniture, but it simply was not useful any longer. So it is time we begin to break in a new favorite chair. It may take a while to feel like it fits us like the old one.

“Jobs and roles are the furniture that rest upon the foundation of Christian vocation. From time to time the furniture may change. When the chair wears out or breaks, we do not burn the house. We seek a new chair that we think will fit us” (Jensen, *Shattered Vocations*, pp. 162-163).

<sup>22</sup>Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 95.