

“The Journey of Life: Youth”

Responsive Reading: “David”¹

As you probably remember, today’s message is the second of five that will take us through the various psycho-spiritual developmental phases of the human life-cycle, with the purpose of helping us to discover where we ourselves are and how to move forward toward greater spiritual maturity. A parallel purpose is to help us know more fully how we might do a better job of encouraging one another toward deeper lives of faith, grounded in personal and joyful relationship with God and with each other.

As I mentioned last week, there are many images by which we might conceptualize the cycle of our lives. While some might use something rather like a “bell curve,” I prefer a diagram that looks more like a “cigar,” having five twenty-year segments. And although from a physical perspective our lives do begin, wax, wane, and end, from a spiritual perspective, the diagram is open at the far end, because while our bodies do return to the earth, our spirits do not. You and I are eternal creatures!

The idea of developmental stages means that each season of our lives has key skills whose development comes to the fore in that era, and when we successfully acquire those skills, they leave behind what we might call a “foundation for growth” that becomes an asset and a resource for each succeeding stage. On the other hand, when we fail to adequately acquire the skills necessary for successful completion of a developmental stage, that failure leaves behind it a deposit of the opposite kind, a defect, a weak place in the foundations of our lives. And this weak place in the foundation of our lives makes it much more difficult for us to experience the abundant life that God intends.

I suggested last week that one way to think about these developmental strengths and weaknesses is to think about a stack of blocks. If one of the early blocks is badly formed, the entire stack becomes both tilted off center and more unstable than it should be. While we don’t appear to be able to remove such malformed blocks, we do have the ability to insert blocks later on that offset the malformation and restore balance and stability to our lives.

Although each of us has our own share of “malformed blocks,” God’s work of redemption has the purpose of restoring the balance and stability, the hope and competence for which we yearn. And as we learn more about the processes of psychospiritual development, we’ll find that it’s possible to avoid a good many of the “malformed blocks” that might otherwise end up in our lives and in the lives of our children.

For each of the stages of our lives, we’ll continue to use a “template” that includes five dimensions. These dimensions will be the **“Positive Polarity”** of the Stage, together with its corresponding **“Negative Polarity”**; the **“Deadly Sin”** that is the danger of the stage, together with its corresponding **“Saving Virtue”**; and finally, we’ll look at some of the **“Life-Giving Blessings”** that are appropriate to that season of our lives.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on March 9, 2014. Much of the developmental information in this sermon comes from one 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).

Last week, we looked at the four developmental seasons that precede puberty, and this week, we'll focus on the developmental sequence between puberty and young adulthood, which we usually call "youth," "adolescence," or "the teenage years."² And as usual, there will be additional resources available with the online version of this sermon.³

As we consider "adolescence," we should begin by noting that, more than any other stage of life, adolescence varies from culture to culture. In fact, the whole idea of adolescence is really much more an invention of industrial and post-industrial societies than it is the consequence of natural human needs.⁴

Both the beginning and the ending of adolescence are hard to pin down. In the United States, adolescence is usually considered to begin with puberty and to end when persons become able to function in roles associated with adulthood, including a certain measure of psychological independence from parents and the ability to be self-supporting. (By those criteria, some persons never leave adolescence at all.)⁵

If you're in or past the teenage years, I'll bet you remember that the physical and physiological changes that mark entry into adolescence are profoundly felt in the spirit as well, as young persons are confronted with new images of themselves that are very different from what they've experienced previously. Their parents, too, wonder what in the world has become of the children they once knew!

The onset of puberty brings with it rapid physical growth, the development of what we somewhat euphemistically call "secondary sexual characteristics," and the beginning of formal operational thought—that is, the ability to think about thinking. Young people become able to deal with propositions and hypotheses, to reflect on theoretical events, to think deductively and inductively, and to generally "figure things out."

In adolescence, our experience of life becomes more linear and more future-oriented, as formal operational thinking makes us able to imagine future possibilities that are more firmly anchored in reality than the dreams of childhood tend to be. The development of what's called "mutual interpersonal perspective taking" catapults young people into the tensions of developing selfhood such as this familiar one: "I see you seeing me. I see you seeing me seeing you; and I attempt to construct the me I think you see."⁶

As we become aware of ourselves in new ways, we become **Self**-conscious, and this awareness tends to morph initially into a sense of uniqueness that is exquisitely painful: "No one else has the problems I'm having. No one else has a terrible complexion. No one else is too tall for their weight. No one else has to wear deodorant. No one else's hair grows in four different directions at once." While none of those statements is true, they *feel* true, and they *feel* painful!

² 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"

³ Notice in particular the documents that will be posted giving overviews of the developmental tasks for each phase of life and the stages of faith through which it is possible to pass as we grow.

⁴ Daniel Aleshire, *FaithCare: Ministering to All God's People through the Ages of Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), p. 127.

⁵ Aleshire, pp. 127-128.

⁶ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 72.

Adolescence is a conformist stage of life, as we become acutely attuned to the expectations of others, coupled with a sense of our own identity that is not yet sure enough to enable us to know and to maintain our own point of view.⁷ One of the more helpful things adults can do to encourage young people in such struggles is to help them to remember that they are still “humans under construction,” not yet finished products (PBPGIFWMY).⁸

While it may sometimes be necessary to make corrections to adolescent choices of clothing, we do well never to call attention to physical things about which they can do nothing, such as size, complexion, lack of coordination, and other things of that nature. And while corrections to behavior may sometimes be needed, we should never, ever engage in comments that diminish the personhood of these “humans under construction” whom we love.

Having said all this, let’s examine our template as it relates to adolescence:

The Positive Polarity: As we’ve noted, the teen years are characterized by rapid physical growth, combined with puberty and the beginning of life’s movement away from our family of origin. As adolescents move from one social context to another, they become aware of very different senses of themselves in differing contexts. The task of this stage is to discover and to develop a coherent, relatively stable sense of self as its **positive polarity**. This sense of self is known as **identity**.

“Identity” is a composite of social roles, moral commitments, self-reliance, and developed skills. In this way, identity is constructed on the foundation of the successes of the previous four stages. Personal identity is basically a matter of **self**-recognition, of saying “This is the real me! This is where I am most active and alive!” One of my favorite recollections of Nathan’s adolescence was his coming to me dressed in a particular set of clothing that included combat boots, and asking quite earnestly, “Dad, does this look like me?”

Finally, from a faith perspective, a crucial part of developing personal identity involves understanding myself-in-relation-to-God.⁹

The Negative Polarity: The **negative polarity** opposite to *identity* is **confusion**. Those young people who find themselves without a developed sense of will and will power, with little purpose and less discipline, experience considerable difficulty sorting through the “me” and “not-me” experiences of adolescence. Finding no positive center around which to gather their selfhood, these youth tend to become negative and “over-against,” living out rebellious inclinations that seek notoriety through self-destruction rather than self-discipline.

The Deadly Sin: Youth who are thus confused about themselves, and who can find no legitimate sense of self-worth, frequently attempt to fabricate such a sense. The **Deadly Sin** represented by such counterfeit self-worth is **pride**.¹⁰ Pride causes persons to distance themselves from others and to refuse to acknowledge our universal human need for positive relationships. Pride rejects the necessary obligations of being a constructive member of society and is unwilling to grant preeminence, or even significance, to anyone else.

The Saving Virtue: In counterpoint to pride, the **Saving Virtue** of adolescence is its increasing capacity for **fidelity**; for sustaining loyalties and friendships freely pledged in spite of their cost. As the opposite of pride, fidelity, or faithfulness, focuses on relationships. Faithfulness involves a strong sense of duty, truthfulness, genuineness, loyalty, fairness, and devotion. The

⁷ Technically, this is called having “an external locus of control.”

⁸ “Please Be Patient. God Isn’t Finished With Me Yet.”

⁹ Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory*, p. 27.

¹⁰ Pride is traditionally the root of all sin. It is certainly destructive, whether or not it is primal.

sense of oneself as *being* a Self, as being a person who *can* be faithful, comes from being so regarded by significant others; but in an ultimate sense, selfhood can be conferred only by God. Indeed, as faith has always taught, escape from a false self based on pridefulness comes only from becoming centered in God.¹¹

It was this sense of youthful fidelity and faithfulness that was described of David and Jonathan shortly after our text: *After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself* (1 Samuel 18:1).

Developing a sense of identity requires knowing both “this is who I am” and “this is who I am not.”¹² And the development of fidelity involves being faithful to our commitments, even when their cost is more than we expected (Psalm 15:4b).

One of my favorite stories about faithfulness has to do with Sir Thomas More. In 1534, Sir Thomas More was the Chancellor of England, and he refused to sign the *Act of Supremacy*, which allowed Henry VIII to divorce his wife and remarry. As a result of this refusal, Sir Thomas More was executed at the Tower of London in 1535. Shortly before his death, More’s daughter, Margaret, was trying to persuade him to change his mind. At least as recorded in the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, her father replied, “When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn’t hope to find himself again.”¹³

As Sir Thomas More understood, identity has a great deal to do with keeping promises. Our culture tells us that we can find our real selves only if we claim our right to self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment. But the truth is that we actually *construct* our Selves by making binding commitments to other people—promises that we will keep even when keeping them exacts a price far higher than we anticipated.

Some people ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from their accomplishments. Other people ask, “Who am I?” and expect the answer to come from what other people think about them. Both of these expectations are badly mistaken. The answer to the question, “Who Am I” is found in the set of promises we make to other people . . . promises that we then keep, no matter what.¹⁴

Finally, in terms of faith development, adolescence brings with it the possibility of movement into the third stage of spiritual growth, technically known as “Synthetic-Conventional Faith.” As a young person’s experience of the world grows to extend far beyond his or her family, there are now a number of spheres that must somehow become coordinated: family, faith, school, peers, street culture, and social media are just a few of these. A growing faith must be able to synthesize values and information from these many sources, providing a coherent sense of self and a deepening personal relationship with God that transcends and anchors that sense of self.

In Synthetic-Conventional Faith, young persons have a more or less consistent system of values and beliefs, but they are mostly unaware of having them, rather like a fish might be unaware of the water in which it swims. Aware or not, these values and beliefs provide needed anchor points for a developing sense of “Who I Am.” And the question of “Who I Am” includes several sub-questions such as **“What does it mean to be the child of these particular parents?” “Who am I**

¹¹ Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 52.

¹² Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 130. Faithfulness “frequently runs counter to adolescent mores, including sexual exploitation, social exclusivism, and the desire to win at all costs.”

¹³ Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (1954).

¹⁴ Lewis Smedes, “The Power of Promises,” in *A Chorus of Witnesses: Models Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, edited by Thomas Long and Cornelius Plantinga (Eerdmans, 1994).

when I am with them?” “Who am I apart from them?” And most importantly, “Who am I in relationship with God?”¹⁵

The transition from adolescence into young adulthood is typically initiated by the experience of “leaving home” either emotionally, physically, or both, such as through college, military service, or work. Some very interesting faith transitions are a part of that process, most especially the idea of “moratorium,” to which we’ll turn our attention next week.

In the end, research indicates that one of the most potent factors in a successful journey through adolescence is to be anchored in the sturdy, wise, and mature faith of one’s parents,¹⁶ which is at least partially conveyed to our children by our giving frequent attention to offering blessing to the persons they are becoming. Some of those **life-giving blessings** might go like this:

- It’s okay for you to sprout wings.
- You can feel sexual without feeling guilty.
- You can be responsible for your own life (feelings, needs, values, behavior)
- It’s okay to be on your own.
- It’s okay for you to grow and to have a place among adults.
- You can leave home and still have a place to come back to.
- You are welcome at home.¹⁷

May God help us to love, to guide, and to bless both deeply and well.

¹⁵ Annette Briggs, in a paper for “The Ministry of Pastoral Care” at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fall 1992.

¹⁶ Kenda Creasy Dean, “Radicalize Hospitality,” in “Open Question-Three Views: How can churches reach nominal believers before they become ‘nones?’” *Christianity Today*, March 2014, 25.

¹⁷ David Carlson, *Counseling and Self-Esteem* (Waco: Word, 1988), pp. 155-156.

David

Leader: *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king" (1 Samuel 16:1).*

People: ***When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:6-7).***

Leader: *When David came in, he was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David (1 Samuel 16:12-13).*

People: ***Time passed, and the Philistine army gathered their forces for war. Their champion, a giant who was nearly ten feet tall, mocked the Israelites every morning as he challenged one of them to single combat. When he heard about this, David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him" (1 Samuel 17:32).***

Leader: *Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it" (1 Samuel 17:33-35).*

People: ***"Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:36-37).***

Leader: *David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands . . . All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (1 Samuel 17:45-47).*

People: ***As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground (1 Samuel 17:48-49).***

Leader: *So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him (1 Samuel 17:50).*

People: ***After removing Saul, [God] made David their king. God testified concerning him: "I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do" (Acts 13:22).***

Leader: The Word of God for the People of God.

Together: **Thanks be to God!**