

Aspire (Week 3) - Spiritual Growth

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

Because yesterday's sermon was a tag-team effort by Pastor Chris and our new General Presbyter Lissa Long, we can't offer up the usual 10 point or less summary (because we don't have Dr. Long's preaching notes).

That said, here's a summary of Pastor Chris' parts and some resources to help you explore more:



1. First, we noticed what at first appears to be a confusing jumble of mixed metaphors in Colossians 2.6-7: "Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to WALK in Him, ROOTED and BUILT UP in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving."

On the one hand, we walk with Christ day by day, but on the other hand we are rooted in Christ (drawing on the Old Testament metaphor of a life like a tree deeply rooted in God, cf. Psalm 1) and we are built up in Christ (a word often used of building construction).

Paul's point seems to be that our spiritual life will involve both movement and stability, adaptation and continuity. Christ is the unfolding, changing path before us but also the unshakeable bedrock beneath every step we take. These two facets will mark every year you travel with Jesus.

A spiritual life not marked by both dynamics is incomplete. Here's how Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmat, writing about these verses, put it: "Both are necessary. Roots do not bring forth dynamic growth and change are incomplete and unhealthy. And growth and change divorced from a firm foundation and deep roots are tossed by every new wind and storm."

Check this out: [Rooted - United Church of Christ Rooted](#)

2. Part of the trick of making spiritual growth accessible to all is to recognize all of us aren't at the same place at the same time in our journeys, and as such we probably have a few differing needs.

The good news is that the pattern of the spiritual journey will be similar for all of us, even if we're currently at different places in that journey. Bruce DeMarest, in his book *Seasons of the Soul*, writes, "The good news is that our spiritual journey is predictable. It occurs in seasons or phases. Rarely does spiritual growth advance in a straight line; it's more like an upward spiral. The Christian spiritual journey involves starting and stopping, digressions, and sometimes reversions. There is secure orientation, painful disorientation, and heartening reorientation. And this cycle repeats over and over again throughout the Christian life."

One of the historic ways to chart the spiritual growth cycle dates back to the 1500s, and is associated with titanic figures like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila.

There are four phases through which we will travel time and again. They are as follows:

Awakening – This is marked by newness and raised awareness. Those who are here need a) the basics, b) a safe place to ask questions, c) an openness by the church to try the new things to which these folks are waking up, and d) a worship service that's relatable and understandable for them.

Purgation – This is a stage marked by loss, subtraction, doubt, confusion, and letting go. Pastor Gordon Atkinson, writing for the Theology at Work Project, describes his own experience of purgation as follows: "I wonder - is my life empty enough to hear from God?...I wondered what else God might want me to let go of. 'Empty yourself.' That's the phrase that kept ringing in my mind. Empty yourself of everything, every encumbrance, and then God will show you what to do next." What do people in this phase need? Most of all, mercy, compassion, and companionship (see [Jude 22](#)). They also need our authenticity about our own times of purgation. They may even need to step back or do less in the congregation as a way to concentrate on their own wellbeing.

Illumination – This is marked by the need to gain wisdom/perspective intentionally, often about a new question, a troublesome area in your life, or a new possibility presented to you. What makes or breaks this phase is a person having access to or finding the resources they need, and having open, repeated conversations with others about the illumination they seek.

Union – This stage is marked by increasing depth, intimacy, connection, and fulfillment; those here feel closely connected to God and what God is asking them to do. Perhaps surprisingly, this is the group most likely to leave the organized church. Why? The answer is twofold: a) they are motivated to serve the community or others in a way that their church doesn't or won't, and b) they yearn for a depth of relationship that their church doesn't provide.

This podcast will describe the four stages: [Season 10: Episode 6 | The Classic Christian Pilgrimage - Transforming Center](#)

This book is good basic presentation of the four stages: [Eternity Is Now in Session: A Radical Rediscovery of What Jesus Really Taught about Salvation, Eternity, and Getting to the Good Place: Ortberg, John](#)

And this set of four videos (each 30-40 min.) covers the same ground as the book: [Awakening | Conversatio Divina](#)