

Faith Development

Scripture Reading: **Luke 18:1-8**

Rewrite these verses here in your own words: _____

Did You Know? A great way to enjoy the Bible and understand it more is to re-tell a reading in your own words.



Faith vs. religion

Religion is faith's expression. It concerns institutions (churches), documents, creeds, doctrines of belief (the Bible, theology), etc. Religion is important, but not *ultimately* important. Faith is the goal; religion is the means to the goal. We teach religion in Sunday school because we are teaching *about* things. But faith cannot be taught. It can be made meaningful, however, by people who share their faith in a community. And that's what makes Sunday school different from any other school—the faith of the Christians around us!

What is faith, anyway?

Do the following exercise. Then share your answers with a partner.

1. Which of the following would most help your faith to grow? Rank them in order of importance, with 1 being most important.

- _____ reading the Bible
- _____ having a best friend who's an exemplary Christian
- _____ listening more to the priest and other parish adults
- _____ having some hard evidence about it all
- _____ seeing that my parents are sincere Christians

2. Which statement is most important in relating to God? Rank them in order of importance, with 1 being most important.

_____ Doubts are okay; God understands them.
_____ Faith probably becomes stronger when it is tested through doubt.
_____ We should never doubt.

3. How is the Christian faith most often passed on through others? Rank in order of importance, with 1 being most important.

_____ through words
_____ through example
_____ through loving actions
_____ through the Holy Spirit

4. In each set of two choices, circle the option with which you most identify. Faith is more like:

believing/hoping
stumbling in the dark/walking in the light
doing/knowing
the beliefs we hold/the life we live

Each day we routinely live by faith. We drive across a bridge and trust that it will hold us. We drink a glass of water and have faith that it is not poisoned. Then, when it comes time to trust Christ, we have a tendency to want “to see” (just as the apostle Thomas wanted to see the wounds in Jesus’ hands).

How Does Faith Grow?

Did you know there was such a thing as the study of “faith development?”

Just as there are certain stages people go through when they develop physically, morally (how they approach right and wrong) and cognitively (how they think), there are certain stages of development in how they grow in faith.



And, it's a field of study to which many people have lent their efforts. One such person is John Westerhoff.

John Westerhoff is one of the leading figures in the field of religious education theory. A professor of Religion and Education at Duke University Divinity School and editor of the international and scholarly journal *Religious Education*, Westerhoff is an Episcopal priest, worldwide lecturer and author of more than fifteen books.

Westerhoff suggests that we talk about *styles* of faith and that there are four distinctive styles in the lifespan of a human being: *experienced* faith, *affiliative* faith, *searching* faith, and *owned* faith. More on these in a moment.

Westerhoff makes an analogy between these styles of faith and rings on a tree!

- a. A tree with one ring is as much a tree as a tree with four rings. It's complete and whole. Similarly, one style of faith is not better or greater than another.
- b. A tree needs basic things to grow. If the right environment is lacking, no new rings are added. Similarly, we expand from one style of faith to another only if the proper environment is present.
- c. A tree acquires one ring at a time in a slow and gradual manner. We don't see the expansion actually happening. In the same way, a new style of faith is acquired gradually, in order. You can't skip over a style *or* a ring. (A one-ring tree can't become a three-ring tree without moving through the second ring.)
- d. As a tree grows, it doesn't eliminate rings but adds rings to the one before, keeping all previous rings as it expands. It's the same with faith. We don't ever completely abandon earlier styles of faith. In fact, we often return to an earlier style.

So, what are these styles of faith?

1. EXPERIENCED FAITH



Typically (but not always) a characteristic of little children, those in the “experienced faith” style:

- observe and copy
- are influenced by those with whom they interact
- explore and test in a safe and loving environment
- learn Christ not through words but through experiences with others
- learn trust and acceptance
- learn Christ by living or spending time with others in Christian ways

If the needs of experienced faith have been met, persons may begin to adopt an *affiliative* style of faith.

2. AFFILIATIVE FAITH

Typically a characteristic of older children and young adults (but often the style of adults), those with affiliative faith:

- want to *belong* to a community
- want to make a contribution to that community through active participation
- feel accepted and important to that community.
- stress a religion of the heart, that is, a community that values religious feeling through stories, music, art, symbol, and mystery
- want a community with authority, with a story we value and want to learn

If the needs of affiliative faith have been met, persons may begin to adopt a *searching* style of faith.

3. SEARCHING FAITH

Typically a characteristic of young adults (but often reached later in life or never at all), those with searching faith:

- doubt and question
- look critically into the meaning of things
- explore alternatives to earlier understandings
- test their own tradition by learning about others
- sometimes appear fickle, adopting different ideas one after the other
- learn commitment



If the needs of searching faith have been met, persons may reach the *owned* style of faith.

4. OWNED FAITH

Typically a characteristic of mature adults (but often never reached at all), those with owned faith:

experience true conversion, that is, a major change in their total behavior
live their faith in every way; belief and way of life are joined
stand up for what they believe
work for all the causes of our Lord: peace, justice, charity, love for others



In these styles of faith, where would you put:

a typical Sunday school 3-year-old?
Mother Theresa?
a typical parish member?
your mom, dad, or other close relative?
you?

Assignment: How do we help each other grow in faith?

Pretend you're on the parish council of your church. Design a program for people in each style of faith.

Question: If you could have God answer one question, what would it be? Write it here:

Spend a moment in prayer with the rest of your class, asking God's help in understanding your question and for strength and wisdom in your faith.

AMEN!

Spotlight...

Read **Hebrews 11:1-16**. To these portraits of people of faith, you could add one (of so many!) from the history of the Armenian Church. It would go something like this:

By faith, St. Santookht—the first martyr canonized by the Armenian Church, listened to the good news preached by St. Thaddeus in Armenia. As royal princess, by faith she rejected the crown of her father, King Sanadrook—and chose the sword. Her faith kept her strong when all worldly rewards could have easily led her from the truth of Christ.

After reading (and include the addition on St. Santookht above), answer these questions:

1. What is faith?
2. What do Noah, Abraham, Moses and Santookht have in common?

Focus on You!

On a blank piece of paper, draw three symbols describing your faith right now. Share them with the rest of the class.

