



## **Life and Faith Walking: Joining Youth and God in What Matters • *Roland Martinson***

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**M**y previous lecture began with an exploration of God's frustration, God's change of mind, and God's commitment to a new way of being with humankind as reported in Jeremiah 31. It looked at the subsequent incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth as a clue about how God chooses to work God's way into the heart of a human. I wondered what youth ministry might look like when it enters deeply into the reality of young men and women and examined potential practices that might mark the life of a faith community as it walks the baptismal journey with these men and women between the ages of twelve and twenty-five. In this lecture, I want to work another side of that incarnation. In the incarnation we not only have the great mystery and courage of God entering deeply into the heart of the human, the core of the human, but we have the fullness of God entering into the core of the human. This is incredibly difficult to understand.

God is regularly portrayed alongside of, or over against humankind in Scripture as being distinct, separate, powerful, and so holy that to mix God and the human is to destroy the human. But in Mark's Gospel there is this incredible set of images. For example, there is the account of Jesus showing up at the river and asking John the Baptizer to be baptized. There is some hesitation about whether or not John sees himself worthy to do this, but they get over it and Jesus gets into the water. And when John baptizes him the sky tears open. (The Greek says it's ripped apart.) And God says, "This is my progeny; this is my son." In Jesus, God gets loose. God gets loose in the world. The boundary, heaven, seen in the cosmology of the New Testament separating humankind from God is torn open and God is now loose in it. That is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. At its end, at the moment that Jesus dies, the curtain that is in the temple that separates the crowds of common people from the priests is ripped from top to bottom. And God gets loose in the Temple, in the church. What is it like when God enters into the core, the heart of the

human? I want to wonder what all of that means for ministry with those in the first-third of life.

Let's look at Colossians 1:15–20:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

In my previous lecture, we started with Jesus of Nazareth entering deeply into the particularity of the realities of life at the heart of the human. Now we start with the cosmic Christ. Whoa! God is big and alive in Jesus at the core of the human. My first thesis was that in their longing for God, youth will find a church passionate as it enters deeply into their core, discovering their passions. And as we go there passionately, we will discover not only their core, their passions, but the face of God as well. My thesis in this lecture is that in their longing for God, youth will discover a passionate church that has its identity, its destiny, and its vocation in the cosmic Christ. Oh, the audacity of God, to have chosen this crooked-nosed, long-armed, skinny, balding, sixty-one-year-old to be a God-bearer—one cell in the ongoing, in-situated life of the cosmic Christ in the world. We are in fact this continuing life of God at the core of the human. Now, when I take this Jesus up with folks of all ages, but particularly with young people, it's fascinating to see and discover their fascination with him. Whether it's in small town America, or Dakar, Africa, or Asia or South America, I love to sit with someone and wonder about the actions of Jesus, about the words in the Sermon on the Mount, about the way in which he pursues the human and the human pathos. I have not yet found someone who is not intrigued, offended, or caught up in the influence of this story.

I want to wonder with you what it would look like with young men and women if we pursued four or five of the phrases of Colossians 1. First, “For in him all things in heaven and on earth were created.” What this leads me to wonder about is: as I encounter the other, how is it that I take seriously Christ’s handiwork in her, in him, or in them? This text introduces us to the other—all others, enemies included, as God’s handiwork. How do we pursue such an attitude, such a way of life together? Or take, “And in him all things hold together.” In the congregations in which I did youth ministry, sometimes we couldn’t even get people from the same community to hang out with one another. And yet this claim is that in this one whom we know as Christ, the jocks and the nerds and the ticks, the whole spectrum—even those who have to walk the gauntlet of the lockers and those who are the gauntlet—all hold together in this Jesus. What does it look like, this holding together? He is the head of the body of the church. What does it mean to be in-situated? Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster wrote a book in which they describe this as “God-bearing.”<sup>1</sup> We, being the in-situated, continuing, in-fleshed, concrete contemporary bearers of this cosmic Christ, are God-bearers. What does it look like to imagine the sound of a thirteen-year-old’s voice, the touch of a sixteen-year-old’s hand, the presence of a seventeen-year-old’s being? It’s fanning the flickering flame of life—a sacred event. Or to look at this phrase, “God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things.” All things. They look at a world, they look at the Middle East, they look at Iraq, and I hear the heaviness on their hearts, the military, making peace. What does this reconciliation look like in Christ? It’s interesting to take Colossians 1 and set it alongside 1 Corinthians 13 and simply let the two unpack each other. And together with young women and men to wonder, what is this way of love and mercy and justice that is the heart of God that has come to dwell in the gauntlet of the hallway locker room? What does it look like?

Now what I want to do is to step out of this incredible set of theological affirmations and ask, What do we have available to us that tells us something about how this happens? There are women and men across America doing this: claiming this identity, claiming this destiny, experiencing this vocation. I am going to take you into a couple of places where through research we are discovering this is happening and that it all matters. Let’s look at a little of what the National Study of Youth and Religion is learning about the practice of this in-situated body of Christ in the world among young men and women.<sup>2</sup> This piece is taking a little harvesting from the five reports that have

come so far from what's been done. The National Study of Youth and Religion states: "The direct influence of religion on many outcomes is substantial enough to be worth noting." What's going on here is that sociologists are making an argument back across the grain of research that's been done on young men and women that has regularly left out religion as one of the variables. One of the reasons why we're doing so much research at Luther Seminary now is, in the years that I was at Search Institute, we slowly quit working faith as a significant variable and did almost all of our work on citizenship rather than discipleship. If you look at the forty assets in the asset-based developmental studies, there is only one or two that have anything to do directly with faith. It was clear as I watched the research unfolding that we have shifted from looking at primarily discipleship to looking at citizenship. In looking at citizenship, we are somehow developing a bias against the very faith that had given rise to Search Institute. Christian Smith and the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina are working back across that bias. Their findings reveal that religion does directly and indirectly matter in the life, the economy, and the unfolding development of young men and women. It really matters. This explosion of information in this study comes out of 3,300 telephone interviews with young men and women, their parents, and about 275 one-on-one interviews with young men and women about their faith life. It will be a tool that will be available for exploring the power of the body of Christ at work in the lives of young men and women.

Another study that has fascinated me for the past three years and now guides much of what we do in Luther Seminary's six degree programs, in our research, and in our consultation with congregations is the "Faith Factor Study." As we listen to young men and women who are experiencing a great variety of differing relationships with faith communities, those who have remained within a life of faith and a life of ministry regularly report that there are eight factors which sustain their life with God and give them the courage and strength to work in ministry.

First, they have integrated faith into their family identity and practice. It's one of the top factors that emerge. One woman said it this way: "In our family, God was in our armpits and pores. It was like we fought with God when we were angry; we danced with God when we were happy; it was like God was in the water that we drank." Families matter. Family practices matter.

Second, they have three or more adult mentors of vital faith. And what they're talking about here most often is having living examples, living icons of

the diversity of how faith functions in the lives of different people. So they get a sense of “is this authentic, is this real, might it work for me?”

Third, they have done service in the name of Jesus Christ. They talk about being together with other young women and men, forming community, and doing God in a way that matters. And coming out of that experience, they talk about how the reality of God has in fact come alive among them. In the name of Christ, they come together with others and see God change the world through their activities.

Fourth, they were apprenticed early into leadership and ministry. These young men and women point to someone who discovered that they had strengths, gifts, and passions; picked up on those gifts, strengths, and passions; and invited them to use that in leadership in the body of Christ. A young woman started playing the violin, she told me, when she was four. By the time she was ten or eleven, she was an accomplished violinist. Her pastor invited her to play at least once a month, often for funerals. She said, “People came to me and told me how the strings of my violin healed the broken strings of their hearts.” She said, “I never doubted that God existed. Sometimes I had questions. I was angry with God and upset with God, but I never doubted that God existed because I regularly had people bear witness to the fact that God was at work healing people through my music.”

Fifth, they have participated in a meaningful church experience in which youth are valued. Here they talk about “people who look into our faces in our congregations as though we are actually there.” These churches do worship in ways that connect with the realities, with the metaphors, with the questions that are at work in our life. And the process of worship gives us a sense that this is not the keeping of a museum, but the participation in a lively encounter with the living God.

Sixth, they have been involved in an engaging senior high and young adult ministry. One young woman said it this way: “As I’ve gotten to meet other people who have started out in the faith like I did—in Baptism and in Sunday school—it’s almost as though they had this great bridge built until about age sixteen. And then about the time people could drive a car, the congregation would have little or nothing to tend the unfolding life of that person between the ages of sixteen and thirty. It’s like I see them walking on this great bridge,” she said, “and stepping off the bridge at about the age sixteen onto what may be a little rope bridge, and some of them make it across the chasm, but most of them don’t.” She was twenty-three-years old and talking about people she

was experiencing at the university where she was attending. Senior high youth ministry, campus ministry, young adult ministry has mattered in the life of these young men and women with whom we are doing the research and picking up their stories.

Seventh, they have engaging Christian friends. A great many young men and women said this, “I was about to leave the faith in some of the transition that takes place in that period of time when we sort of pack up, leave home, and head wherever. One of the ways of thinking about how we do in the church is we do quite well with settlers, but not very well with pilgrims, with people who are in transition. These young men and women say, “what’s happened to us at many of those places is as we’re disconnected from one faith community and on our way to wherever—the military, the university, a new community, or whatever—a friend has picked up with us and invited us into a new faith community and has been the person who has walked alongside of us along the way.” The power of Christian friendships is reported over and over and over again.

And finally, the eighth factor, which I should have known since I have a degree in marriage and family counseling and teach pastoral care as another part of what I do: they have experienced Christian community support during a personal crisis. Many of these young men and women talk about the developmental and accidental crisis that take place from about ten years of age until twenty-one or twenty-three. You know them. You walk with young men and women in those times. One young woman said to us in the interview—she was now twenty-two and had a seven-year-old son—“when I got pregnant, neither my parents nor my congregation really knew what to do with me. I had a good friend at school who invited me into a peer ministry process in another congregation where I had men and women, particularly women, who fussed over me, accepted me, and delighted in my pregnancy. They became surrogate grandparents to my son.” She looked at me and said, “Why wouldn’t I be with them? They are my people.” In my particular theological tradition they call this the theology of the cross. So often we have heard from young men and women reporting about a congregation that walked with them during their times of struggle.

When I look at those eight factors, I hear the New Testament ringing out—the characteristics and traits of the incarnation, reported by young men and women as to what has mattered in terms of sustaining them in faith. Another study that I am involved in is called “A Study of Exemplary Youth Ministry

Congregations.” Let me introduce to you just a bit of what we have learned so far. Here is what the study has done. We gathered leaders from seven denominations: Roman Catholic, United Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Southern Baptist, Assemblies of God, and Mission Covenant. Someone looked at me and said, “This sounds like a joke.” It has been a wonderful, difficult conversation and has created a powerful set of relationships. Think about having people from those disparate theological backgrounds together to attempt to find a way of talking about salvation, discipleship, and understanding the marks of the church.

We developed thirty-four indicators wrapped around seven major families or clusters of traits that we came to use as a way of identifying Christian faith maturity in a young person. We wanted to ask ourselves, how would we know one if we saw it? At the same time we wanted to be really careful about not turning faith into a set of works. Lutherans, like myself, are kind of skittish about these kinds of things. We had these conversations and these thirty-four indicators emerged. We sent these indicators to people who knew congregations across these seven denominations and invited them to nominate congregations across the country that were doing exemplary youth ministry. Once someone had nominated a congregation, we then took the sheet and sent it to people in those congregations and asked them to validate the nomination. Is this true about you or not? It was really interesting to get answers back. They said, “Who told you about us? We don’t think we’re doing much of value.” Then they would go through this form and identify what they were doing. On the basis of that nomination and validation, we chose 231 congregations to whom we sent a major quantitative survey. We shepherded those surveys through the senior pastor’s office, the person doing youth ministry, young people in the congregation in the ministry, their parents, and youth workers—that is, persons that were volunteers working with young people.

We now have back about six thousand of those; we have broken those down into the categories of people of which I have spoken. And we are now about to add a qualitative aspect to the research. We have selected three congregations from each of those seven denominations, twenty-one congregations in total, with whom we’re going to do a qualitative research visit—observing what’s going on, interviewing them, and conducting focus groups. Early in our inquiry and our factoring stage, we sent a sheet that was to be filled out by the key person leading youth ministry in the congregation. It asked them about three major aspects of their ministry. What has emerged from those

responses is a telling story of what it is that marks these exemplary congregations.

One of the marks of an exemplary youth ministry is a culture, that is, an environment, a community first of all, in which, the key leadership in the congregation—senior pastor, the elders, the presbytery, the council, whoever is working in that particular congregation’s leadership—has a deep sense of the importance of young men and women. The leadership in these churches values these young men and women in their baptismal journey and are unrelenting in seeing that young men and women are included in the intergenerational fullness of the life of the parish. For example, one of them said, “There’s no call committee here to either an ordained position without at least two or three young people being on the call committee.” So when they called the senior minister to this congregation, there were three young people on the committee. The young people also participate in budgetary discussions. That is one whole set of ideas that has emerged from the study. There is not so much any one set of activities or one person, but a culture—a culture that values and develops the power of this ministry. Finally, I want to take you now into what, for me, is an emerging metaphor for what youth and family ministry in the twenty-first century will look like if it has durable, lasting traction. I have been haunted since 1975 and Dean Hoage’s study about whether or not what I’m doing matters. Beyond just being liked, having large numbers come out, making things happen right now, I want to know, does what we are doing with young men and women contribute to the quality of their life and to the ongoing development of their faith? I believe the youth and family ministry movement has matured to the point where now we’re starting to ask those questions. Beyond just doing it, what matters? What makes a difference? What I have been doing is I have been going to the young men and women themselves and listening. That is why those eight faith factors mean so much to me. They are coming out of ongoing life review, faith review, faith practice review conversations that have been taking place for ten years across the country. This is what they’re saying at age fifteen, but at age twenty, twenty-five, thirty, and thirty-five, they are saying, “This mattered. This sustained me. This fed my faith. This kept me going in my life with the church.”

Here is the metaphor that is emerging for me: When youth and family ministry and a congregation is life (that is, the whole life, not just a compartment); when it is the whole real life of the young person, their friends, and

their community; when it is life-oriented (life and faith) and gets at the spirituality, the confession of that particular faith community and the struggle to live out that in the life of the young person; this kind of youth ministry has traction. I believe this is what youth and family ministry that has traction is going to look like in the next decade. It has got to touch down deeply in the whole person in the world, the real faith struggles of young men and women; it has got to be about community; it has got to be about celebrating the power and presence of God; it has got to be about the world.

Here are ten items that I believe characterize that emerging metaphor. First, it involves starting where young people are. That calls for an incredibly challenging process of picking up with, at least, the baptized in our congregations. I get really nervous about having a youth group be the focus of youth ministry. For me, that is a theological error; youth ministry is primarily about a few people who get involved in a particular set of activities. I believe those of us in the reformed traditions, in the Lutheran traditions, in the Catholic traditions say that ministry is at least about including every baptized young man and woman and following that baptismal journey. I believe, however, in most communities these days—if we are caring about Colossians 1 and all God's kids—it is about that 30 to 50 percent out there that do not know little or anything about the God story and how to walk deeply in their lives, starting where they are.

Second, it is about God being the subject of sentences. It's about prayer. One young man said to me, "I can tell the difference between a youth ministry where God is alive and one where God isn't." I said, "How can you know that?" He said, "In the former, they talk about God as the subject of sentences and pray and wonder about where God is leading them. In the latter God is looked at as being an operative, rather than all the subject of sentences and all the focus being on us." He was fifteen-years-old and acting like a theologian discerning where, how, and when a ministry was focused on God's power or on some set of practices that are essentially focused on the people themselves.

Third, it is about going, being, and dwelling with young people. It means that we are tending all of life, especially the nodal moments and events. As young men and women today work out the question, What does it mean to be a woman? What does it mean to be a man? Think for a moment of who it is who tells them how to answer that question. You know the voices. What would it be like for congregations to put together intergenerational possibilities in such a way that that journey will be followed? The Episcopal Church

has done this, and they call this process “Journey into Womanhood,” “Journey into Manhood.” It has become one of the most powerful nodal experiences in the lives of tweens, early adolescence, and middle adolescence. It includes a major worship experience that is built around the mentors and those who have been on the journey with the person who has now come to participate in that worship experience that declares her womanhood or his manhood in the presence of that faith community. We could talk about multiple others. Each year one might think about the unfolding that occurs, the entering into the powers, and the ways of celebrating that.

The fourth item is naming God’s presence and God’s activity, as God—things happen in the lives of these young men and women, but they have little sense that this is what God is up to. For example, Steve, a junior in high school, stood at the back of the sanctuary one Sunday. The reading had been from Ephesians 4, and I focused my sermon on the gifts of the Spirit that God gives for the sake of equipment for ministry. And this junior looked at me and said, “I know my gift. I’m a driver.” He had just gotten his driver’s license. My mindset left the sanctuary as soon as I went out into the parking lot and saw his car. It was a 1967 Oldsmobile 442, with a 454-cubic-inch engine under the hood. It was jacked up. It had a red-orange axel with a stainless steel differential cap. He said, “I know my gift. I am a driver.” I was trying to respond. I didn’t know what was appropriate to say. He said to me, “You’re looking for folks to drive the elderly to church.” And now my mind is scrambling even more, and I’m trying to figure this out. Suddenly Laura jumps into my mind; she is a seventy-three-year-old brilliant woman, feisty, suffering from rheumatoid arthritis, because she had typed theses for North Dakota State University students. When she typed their theses, they would always pass. She would call them up and say, “Your sentence structure is not correct; the paragraphs don’t flow well; you don’t present your argument clearly; you’ve got to do more research here.” It didn’t matter whether it was science or literature; whenever she typed their theses, they always passed. She had a mind like a steel trap. But now she couldn’t get to church, she was six miles away, and she couldn’t drive. I thought, Steve and Laura. So we made an appointment.

On Wednesday, we rumbled on down to Laura’s house, Steve and I. We came to the door, and she said, “Is it him?” I said, “Yes. He’s going to be the driver.” And the meeting was awful, terrible. But we set up an appointment. He would pick her up at about ten minutes after eight for the 8:30 service. He hadn’t been at church at 8:30 for as long as I could remember. He would

kind of wander in at ten after eleven. Twenty-five after eight the next Sunday, the chariot rumbled up to church. Steve got out and opened the door for her; the door fell all the way open—that doohickey that keeps the door from falling all the way open was gone. He was an engine person, not a body man. He offered her his arm, and she walked alongside of him into church, passing by me to get into the pews. And this went on, Sunday after Sunday. About the sixth Sunday, the chariot rumbled up, the door flopped open, he gave her his arm, they walked into church, and as they were walking past me, she looked over her shoulder and winked. And I was thinking, so what's this about? She said to me, "Isn't this great?" I wasn't so sure. Sometimes she would come up to me after the sermon and say, "You used the objective case when you should have used the nominative case. And you know that's not the whole council of God, there are other places in the Bible that say differently than what you were saying." I mean, she was like that—wonderful.

Let me share with you some of the things that were happening in the car. About the second time he came to pick her up, she got in and looked across, and he was sitting hunkered over the steering wheel. She said to him, "Sit up straight. Your posture is terrible." So he sat up. The next week she got in the car and said, "Your hands are horrible. You've been working on engines, and they're all full of grease and dirt. Scrub them. No young woman is ever going to let you near her." Well, he didn't scrub them, because he worked on engines. The next week when she saw him, he had not scrubbed his hands. She got in the car with a brown bag. In it were lava soap and a scrub brush. She said, "Use this." And he did. Today, Steve is a lawyer. I think it is the only way he could defend himself against Laura. He got to law school not only because she recognized his gift and discerned it in the car but she helped him go there.

Today he is a lawyer in Chicago, Illinois, and has started a group of lawyers who go to some of the most difficult schools in Chicago and ask, "Do you have any young men who would enjoy or might use a relationship with another man who is older and shares a common passion?" And so these, now about fifty lawyers, get hooked up with young guys in the city, around common passions. Some of them are surfers, some of them are into music, and some of them are nerdy. And they are having the same transformational impact on these young men's lives as Laura had on Steve in the car. When I tell that story and name it as a God activity, invariably I have women and men come to

me afterward and start witnessing to me, naming their being little Christ's in the world and discovering their spiritual gifts.

The fifth item, God-bearing, I have mentioned already. It involves stewarding all of our gifts. I believe that one of the most interesting experiences with a thirteen-year-old, fourteen-year-old, or fifteen-year-old is to fuss long enough to discover their emerging powers, their particular strengths, and their particular gifts and then to watch what happens once they get hooked up with that passion and a place where that gift can have traction. I discover that all kinds of self-worth issues and self-esteem issues begin falling by the wayside as they get engaged and their lives have traction, both within the church and out in the world.

The sixth item is practicing life and faith together. There is now this emerging notion that in the multiple intelligences of young men and women, simply feeding their minds with ideas is not enough. If we work with all of the intelligences and actually engage their full lifestyle in a whole set of practices, something more powerful may occur so that friends and the kind of clothes we buy and how we buy clothes and how we tend the earth are all an intentional part of our way of life.

Tending the world is the seventh item. I have discovered that young men and women cannot not worship. They will just worship where it can be done, where it connects with them. I discovered this for the first time when I took my kids from one of our stayed Lutheran churches in Southern California in the late 1960s to be at a concert of Crosby, Stills, and Nash. About two-thirds of the way through the concert, there was an altar call. The song was eleven minutes long. And as the thing unfolded—we were sitting up in the nosebleed section, because that's all I could afford—my youth group, my whole youth group, got up and went to the altar. And I'm a Lutheran! We were dancing in the aisles and so on. Later we sat back at a Godfather's Pizza unpacking what had happened that night, and they described for me their worship experience. Kids want to glorify God, and they will find a way, a place, to do it if it is not among us in our congregations. But it can be, and they can help us. We need to work this out. They have been for a long time. Think about where gospel music got started. Many of the great gospel, jazz, and blues singers got started because someone told them, "You've got the gift."

The eighth item is tending the world. You know this. These young people produce more volunteer hours than any generation before them, even now. They want to get involved one step at a time and change it—many times

changing their parents in regard to this matter. There is power in having a community with whom to gather and celebrate this journey. A young woman I know was a junior in high school who had come from a big city to follow her mother into a smaller town on a first call and did not want to go there. And now she was a newcomer, and she was looked at with a certain amount of curiosity, but there was not much welcoming into the depth of what was already there. The school was divided among several groups. What happened at church became the community that enabled her to have a transitional life into the community. That group has now become a place for young men and women to celebrate life on the journey into their powers.

This is for me an emerging metaphor. Does it square with the world that you're living with? What would you add to it? What would you take from it? Do you have an emerging metaphor? What does this mean? Where is God in all of this? Develop your own metaphor, continue faith walking, and join youth and God in the quest for what matters.

### **Notes**

1. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998).
2. For more information, please visit the National Study of Youth and Religion Web site at [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org).