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The Rev. Jack Alvey

In their book **The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith**, Janet Hagberg and Robert Guelich describe six stages of faith.

Stage one is about waking up to the presence of God. This stage might be compared to the first months of a dating relationship. You can't stop thinking about God. You can't get enough of God.

This desire for God leads to stage two, which centers around wanting to learn more about God and the Christian faith. Stage two looks like going to Sunday school, joining a Bible study, or being in worship every week.

Stage three is what they call the Active Life. Here, your faith is revealed through service to God and neighbor. This stage might look like community outreach, leading a ministry, or serving in your local congregation.

Stage four is called the Journey Inward. In this stage, you begin to wrestle with who the world has taught you to be and who God in Christ is calling you to be. You confront how your secular obligations interfere with your devotion to God. Stage four brings you face-to-face with competing loyalties, doubts, and questions.

Getting through stage four requires going through what the authors call the Wall. In my mind, the Wall is synonymous with the cross. Stage four is where many of us turn back. The cross is where many of Jesus' followers turned back. And I know I've turned back from this part of the spiritual journey many times—only to find there isn't a real way forward except through the Wall, through the cross.

Stage five is found on the other side of the Wall—or the cross. It is called the Journey Outward. Here you leave the old life behind and embrace the new life in Christ. You continue to learn and serve, but the motivation for doing so changes. It no longer comes from a desire simply to know more about God and the Christian faith. It flows out of your relationship with God and your lived experience of the Christian faith.

The final stage is called the Life of Love. Hagberg and Guelich say that few of us ever reach this stage. In this stage, one surrenders all they are and all they have in service to God. The one who reaches this stage leaves family, possessions, and even dreams behind. Not even

all the names on our calendar of saints reached this stage—except a few, like Mother Teresa, St. Francis of Assisi, or one of the apostles. And even those faithful few turned back from the Wall or the cross more than once.

So, in today's lesson, I wonder if Jesus is inviting the crowd (and us) to consider what it means to journey through stage four.

What does it look like to move from a faith that is largely concerned with doing for God, to a faith that is largely concerned with being with God?

What does it look like to move from a faith that is largely performative, to a faith that is truly transformative?

Or for us today, the question might be: What does it look like to go from being a good church member to being a committed follower of Jesus in the world?

At this point in the gospel narrative, the followers of Jesus have completed stage three. They have been awakened to God's presence in Christ. They have heard God's call on their lives through the voice of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. They have learned from their Rabbi. They've listened to his sermons. They've heard his parables. They've witnessed his healings and miracles. They've even been sent out by Jesus to serve, to heal, and to proclaim the message of the kingdom.

Now, Jesus is inviting them into the next stage of faith. He is inviting them into stage four—the Journey Inward. A journey that will lead them to the proverbial Wall. A journey that will take them to the cross.

Jesus says, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."

That statement is hard to comprehend. It is hard to hear. But through the lens of the stages of faith, maybe we can hear Jesus say something like:

- "If you want the total transformation that only I can give, you must journey through the Wall."

- Or, "If you want the life God truly intends for you, you must let go of the old life so you can embrace the new one."

The problem, of course, is that we aren't very good at letting go. We like to hold onto things long past their expiration date. We cling to things that might have served us once, but now only serve to hold us back.

We need God's help. We need God's intervention. And while painful, that intervention is the cross.

If you choose not to take up the cross, God won't love you any less. If you turn back from the Wall, God won't withdraw his love for you. But turning back from the cross does mean you will miss out on the fullness of God's healing love—a love that has the power to burn away everything that makes the soul sick.

Pastor and author Peter Scazzero says: "The Wall [the cross] is God's way of rewiring and purging our affections and passions so that we might delight in his love and enter into a richer, fuller communion with him. Through the Wall, God frees us from unhealthy worldly attachments."

As we journey through the Wall and walk the way of the cross, God's healing love begins to burn away our unhealthy attachments. And as you know—or as you can imagine—this is painful.

But the good news is that the pain is evidence of how God is burning away your pride and arrogance and envy—the root of sin. And when your pride and arrogance and envy are destroyed, you no longer need the things that used to feed them.

Your ego no longer needs to be fed by your accomplishments, your possessions, and your popularity. Instead, you are now fed with food that lasts. You are fed by the Christ who now takes up residence in you.

This burning away of unhealthy desires creates space in our souls for Christ to dwell. And as Christ fills us, we begin to long for healthy and holy things—things that enrich our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves. Things that transform the world inside us, and the world around us.

As I've said before, our spiritual journeys are not linear. We take one step forward and two steps back. Sometimes we skip steps. Sometimes we fall off the path altogether. And God's love for us is so fierce that God will never tire of picking us up again when we do fall.

Don't think of these stages as rules to follow in order. Think of them as a map. And like any good map, these stages can help you discern where you are, and where you might go next—especially if you keep finding yourself stuck at the Wall or at the cross.

Since it's Kickoff Sunday, let me close with a sports-related story. A colleague of mine wanted to lose eight pounds. So he joined Iron Tribe Fitness. When he signed up, the trainer told him: "Iron Tribe is a lifestyle. If you just want to lose eight pounds, you should join a regular gym."

He ignored the advice, lost the weight, and quit.

As funny as that sounds, that's often how we treat the church. We join because we want our kids to grow up learning about God. We want community with people who think like us. We want a church that cares about the marginalized. We want good preaching and good music.

All of these are fine reasons to join a church. But these are really just hooks God is using to invite you deeper.

What happens when your kids grow up? Or when you meet people in the church who don't share your worldview? Or when the church serves the "wrong" kind of marginalized people? Or when the preacher or music minister moves on?

If your life of faith never moves beyond those hooks, you may end up quitting too.

God's invitation to you, to all of us through Ascension, is bigger than à la carte Christianity. God is inviting all of us—me included—into all six stages of faith. Through our worship, our ministries, and our programs, God is calling us to the kind of transformation that comes only by following Jesus to the cross and beyond.

The path won't always be straight. It won't always be flat. It won't always be clear. But there is not one step of that path that God cannot use to transform the world inside of you—and the world around you—with the healing power of Christ's love.

A love that burns away all that is unhealthy and unholy in your soul—so that the living Christ can take up residence in you. Transforming you into the person you've always meant to be: a beloved son or daughter or sister or brother or mother or father—a beloved member of God's family.