

The Spiritual Formation of Jesus: Progressive (various scriptures)

We've been exploring the spiritual formation of Jesus during his physical lifetime under the assumption that he was fully human and that during his time on earth he lived within the same capacity for human life common to all people. This means that he understands fully what it means to live as a human being—he knows our situation first-hand and by that he readily empathizes with the challenges and opportunities we encounter; when we come to him in conversation, we know that he knows what we're talking about. By the same token, because he approached life like this, his life provides a model for how we are able to live into the fullness of what God desires for us. What formed him is available to us as well, if we will attend to that formation intentionally. God desires this for us as Romans 8:29 tells us, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he (Jesus) might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters."

Today I want to lead your thought to consider that this process of formation in Jesus was progressive—it happened over time and through experience under the direction of the Spirit. My point is that Jesus didn't arrive at his self-understanding all in one moment where one day he was just another faithful Jew, and the next day he understood himself to be God in the flesh. Both of these points were part of his self-understanding, but there was time and experience between them that led him through that process. How this happened is what we want to explore in our time together today.

At the outset, let's recall that Jesus was grounded in Scripture which informed his knowledge of God through the record of God's engagement with Israel and what that meant for the purpose God was pursuing in creation. Like all faithful Jews of his day, Jesus surely longed for the restoration of Israel, and though there's no record of this in Scripture, it seems likely that his parents would have told him something of the circumstances surrounding his birth. Yet Jesus didn't presume what that meant, perhaps though, it led him to nurturing an intimate relationship with God through solitude and prayer—habits regularly referenced in the gospels.

As you read through the gospels, you can find evidence for the progression in Jesus' self-understanding. This process included both his growing knowledge of God and his increasing engagement with people that prompted his self-awareness. In the interest of time, allow me to quickly summarize that progression of awareness, and then we'll consider the motivation for it.

Apart from the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the outline of this progression picks up when we meet Jesus at 30 years of age. At this point in his life, Jesus was a righteous Israelite living in God's covenant of love based on his understanding of Deuteronomy, particularly chapter 7, vs. 9 that we touched on last week. Something drew him to the ministry of John the baptizer—he responds to the call for baptism, and the gospels record a voice from the heavens declaring, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." The Spirit, in the form of a dove descends upon him, which is a sign to John about Jesus' role. The word "Son" in relation to God was regularly used to identify Kings, and sometimes prophets—it signified the one through whom God would work. On this occasion, then, Jesus acquires some understanding of his becoming a prophetic witness to the work of God. Some time later, in John 4 during a conversation with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, when she mentions the anticipated coming of the messiah, Jesus declares himself as that messiah—more than a prophet or rabbi, now he understood himself as messiah. In the gospels we read of Jesus referring to himself as the Son of Man—a clear reference to an ancient prophecy in the book of Daniel, chapter 7, where one "like the Son of Man" is clearly the Savior of the world. Not just messiah of Israel, now also Savior of the world. In John 14, on the night of his betrayal, in conversation with his disciples, Jesus declares himself to be the personification of God in the world—"if you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Not just Savior of the world, now also God in the flesh. On that same night, as recorded in John 17, we read the words of his prayer in which he speaks of returning to the glory he once had with the Father as he understands himself to be the pre-existent Word of God sharing in God's being and glory. And then in Mark 14, in response to the High Priest and members of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin, he

identifies himself as the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of Heaven—in this he declares himself the Sovereign Ruler of all creation.

The question before us is this: what prompted this formation in Jesus? What led him to this progressive self-awareness? Richard Rohr provides a bit of helpful insight by observing that Jesus was continually directed towards pain in creation. As he encountered physical suffering, he was open to God's purpose for the moment before him, and his compassion, aligned with God's love channeled God's power to restore wholeness to those deprived of it. His spiritual formation was progressing by virtue of his interactions with those in pain right in front of him. Initially this took place with individuals providing tangible evidence of God's goodness flowing through him as people's infirmities were healed. Over time, the content of Jesus' teaching began to gain traction as it addressed pain at a deeper, inner level. As the power of God was demonstrated tangibly in the physical realm, the same ability for healing the soul grew as people trusted God's goodness for that part of themselves. While this overlap grew, the scope of Jesus' ministry grew as well, for individual wholeness gave way to national wholeness—what was happening for individuals would also take hold for Israel as a people. By remaining open to God's direction, Jesus was led into an ever growing circle of influence as Gentiles began responding to the offer of wholeness embodied in Jesus. The promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be blessed to be a blessing was being realized. The scope of God's goodness extended beyond Israel to the whole of creation as Jesus remained open to the pain present before him finding in that stance ample opportunity for the goodness of God to run wild in creation. His spiritual formation sharpened as his vision extended into the distant horizons of God's purpose for all.

Here's the lesson for us: your spiritual formation and mine is also progressive, and it follows the pattern laid out in the life of Jesus. Grounded in God's love for us, our love is returned by remaining open to God's leading and purpose, and God uses the circumstances of life taking place right in front of us to prompt compassion that releases God's power bringing wholeness to each moment. Bear in mind that the Spirit will direct us towards the pain in creation where restoration and wholeness is urgent and desired. As we engage with the pain before us, our formation progresses as we see God's goodness and blessing pour into those moments and we witness God's provision sufficient and abundant for whatever is at hand. These are catalytic moments for formative progress.

And therein lies the problem with the contemporary church. For far too long, we have bent the arc of God's goodness back to ourselves. We who have received the benefit of God's goodness, who have had our pain relieved by the grace of God, we have remain satisfied with the work of God in ourselves as though this is sufficient and the goal of God's purpose. In a sense, we have become end-users of God's grace. Which is not to say that there hasn't been any outreach beyond ourselves—certainly there has been good work done in concentrated bursts of effort. But the undercurrent of our faith tends towards ourselves, in securing our own sense of wholeness, in maintaining our gains, while the pain in the world around us multiplies exponentially. Ironically, the more we focus on maintaining our gains, the more we tend towards spiritual lethargy and we find ourselves plateaued in spiritual formation, mired in spiritual inertia. We think one more bible study will get us going again, or one more program will kickstart our growth, but, in fact, the way we're intended to grow is when we allow ourselves to be directed towards pain in creation remaining open to God's leading for direction and power to overcome that pain with God's goodness.

Paul tells us in Romans 8 that creation itself waits in eager expectation for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed. Who are the children of God? They are those who pour God's goodness over the pain in creation. They are blessed to be a blessing—they are the vessels of God's grace who face pain for the purpose of restoration. They are drawn to the broken, the hurt, the vandalized and scandalized, the vagabonds and outcasts, the ones whose hope has been ripped to shreds. Friends, there is no limit to God's grace. We need not hoard it as though it will run dry. Facing pain is messy and heartbreaking, and its prospect may seem daunting at the moment. But therein lies the promise—whatever measure of grace you expend, will be returned back to you a hundred fold, which will expand your horizon into the

purpose of God for creation. Your formation will sharpen as your vision gains focus to see God at work, through you. Engulfed in the trinitarian reality of God, you will find opportunities for the Father's love to sustain you, the grace of Christ to enable you, and the guidance of the Spirit to direct you towards the pain in creation so that God's purpose for creation is realized as God's goodness runs wild in the world. AMEN