

Beyond a “Congregation of One”<sup>1</sup> :  
Biblical Stories as “Pilgrimage and Home”<sup>2</sup> in Emerging Adulthood

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffery Jensen Arnett & Lene Arnett Jensen, “A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults, *Journal of Adolescent Research*/September 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 72.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from Heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts and the angels waited upon him (Mark 1: 9-13).<sup>3</sup>

As we watch our adolescents mature, adults expect a moment like Jesus’ baptism in their lives. We wait for our young people to suddenly rise up from the waters of adolescence, and knowing who they are and what they believe, embark on their life’s work. Traditionally, in the white middle/upper-middle class social location in which adults- including those who are Christian- live and move and make meaning, college graduation or marriage has marked the end of the adolescent period and the movement into the stage called “Young Adulthood.” Adults of our culture still anticipate a defining moment when we shout “Ah -ha! You are an adult now! We are well pleased with you! Go to work, marry, and raise your family. We’ll join you this year for Thanksgiving dinner at your house.” We expect adulthood to be bequeathed to our children exiting adolescence as it was to previous generations of white middle/upper middle class young adults. But, instead, it appears our young people are wandering like Jesus in the wilderness; tempted by many things, testing themselves and being tested as they struggle toward their adulthood.

What role does the Church community have in supporting “the wilderness time” that follows college graduation and precedes marriage and the raising of a family? Does the Story of God’s people as told in the Christian Scriptures have anything to say to these young people as they make their way? How well does the Church understand what is

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<sup>3</sup> All biblical passages taken from the New Revised Standard Bible.

happening developmentally to them during what can be a lengthy period of time? What can we learn from the world of constructive developmental theory that will help Christian adults support young people during their time in the “wilderness”? What models of faithful meaning making can we offer our young people that will invite them to claim their own place in the community of faith’s work toward co-creation of the reign of God?

**Jeffery Jensen Arnett’s “The Winding Road”**

In a ground -breaking book, *Emerging Adulthood: the Late Teens through the Twenties*, Jeffery Jensen Arnett names the ten years of “wilderness time” between adolescence and young adulthood as the “winding road to adulthood.”<sup>4</sup> He argues that adolescence does not end and adulthood immediately follows, but rather a new developmental period of the lifecycle –emerging adulthood<sup>5</sup> -develops:

For today’s young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties. From their late teens to their late twenties they explore the different possibilities available to them in love and work, and move gradually toward making enduring choices. Such freedom to explore different options is exciting, and this is a period of high hopes and big dreams. However, it is also a time of anxiety and uncertainty, because the lives of young people are so unsettled, and many of them have no idea where their explorations will lead.<sup>6</sup>

On the surface, this period seems to be an extension of adolescence. Many of the same identity themes are explored within the emerging adult period: the relationship of the self to parents, sexual partners, and peers, as well as to inherited traditions and the culture itself. However, there are significant differences between adolescents and emerging adults:

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffery Jensen Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Early Twenties*, (Oxford University Press: New York, 2004), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

Adolescents and most emerging adults have in common that they have not yet entered marriage and parenthood. Other than this similarity, however, their lives are much different. Virtually all adolescents (10-18) live at home with one or both parents. In contrast, most emerging adults have moved out of their parent’s homes, and their living situations are extremely diverse. Virtually all adolescents are experiencing the dramatic effect of puberty. In contrast, emerging adults have reached full reproductive maturity. Virtually all adolescents attend secondary school. In contrast, many emerging adults are enrolled in colleges, but nowhere near all of them. Unlike adolescents, their educational paths are diverse, from those who go straight through college and then on to graduate or professional school to those who receive no more education after high school, and every combination in between. Adolescents also have in common that they have the legal status of minors, not adults. They cannot vote, they cannot sign legal documents, and they are legally under the authority of their parents in a variety of ways. In contrast, from the age of 18 onward American emerging adults have all of the legal rights of adults except for the right to buy alcohol which comes at age 21.<sup>7</sup>

In the same way, emerging adults are not yet young adults – those in their thirties:

Emerging adulthood could hardly be more distinct from the thirties. Most emerging adults do not feel that they have reached adulthood, but most people in their thirties feel they have. Most emerging adults are still in the process of seeking out the education, training and job experience that will prepare them for a long-term occupation, but most people in their thirties have settled into a more stable occupational path. Most emerging adults have not yet married, but most people in their thirties are married. Most emerging adults have not yet had a child, but most people in their thirties have at least one child.<sup>8</sup>

Those in their late teens through the late twenties are neither adolescents nor are they young adults. They are in a different place in the life cycle.

Emerging adulthood is a lengthy developmental period of the life cycle, “longer than infancy, longer than early or middle childhood, and as long as adolescence.”<sup>9</sup> Arnett cautions us that “thinking of the years from the late teens through the early twenties as merely the transition to adulthood leads to a focus on what young people in that age

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 21,

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

period are *becoming*, at the cost of what they *are*.<sup>10</sup> They remain sons, daughters and siblings, working out a new definition of their relationship to their families of origin. Some of them are students. Others are continuing professional education or are beginning careers. Most of them are employed in some capacity – most likely not their life’s labor, but some wage-earning work that permits them the economic space from which to explore their options. Many of them are partners – most likely not in a committed relationship with a life partner - still developing their understanding of sexuality, commitment, care and intimacy. Some of them have become parents. Few of them are home owners, most of them preferring to not be tied down to mortgages - or even leases -that limit their choice to pick up stakes and try a new part of the city, country or even the world at a moment’s notice. Emerging adults are explorers. All of them are searching for meaning that makes sense to them personally and individually, testing the waters of the culture around them for the values and institutions in which they can believe and which will give purpose and definition to their adult lives.

It is important to recognize, as Arnett does, that emerging adulthood is a cultural construct of the privileged middle/upper-middle class social location: “Emerging adulthood is not a universal period of human development but a period that exists under certain conditions that have occurred only quite recently and only in some cultures.”<sup>11</sup> He defines the social location of emerging adulthood as existing “mainly in the industrialized or ‘postindustrialized’ countries of the West, along with Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea.”<sup>12</sup> Arnett observes that emerging adulthood is “a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 19

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

characteristic of cultures rather than countries”<sup>13</sup> and suggests that “social class may be more important than ethnicity, with young people in the middle classes or above having more opportunities than young people who are working class or below.”<sup>14</sup>

Yet even as a function of a particular social location,<sup>15</sup> for emerging adulthood to be a valid developmental stage of the lifecycle, we must be able to define the issues and challenges that shape this period and the potential for transformation of the self. It is vitally important that those of us responsible for the formation of Christians become familiar with both the potential and the pitfalls of the emerging adult period as we work with the Holy Spirit to form disciples of Jesus and invite emerging adults into the work of co-creating the reign of God.

### **The Developmental Challenges of Emerging Adulthood**

Arnett defines emerging adulthood as, “the age of identity-explorations, the age of instability, the self- focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities.”<sup>16</sup> Framing this stage of the life cycle in Eriksonian developmental terms,<sup>17</sup> the meaning making task of this period lies in developing sufficient ego strength to explore self, relationships, inherited traditions and culture in the face of the instability created by moving beyond the limits of previously accepted meaning making authorities.

In adolescence, the development of formal operations of the brain invites the self to step outside the inherited meaning making systems and challenge the assumed structures through which meaning has been previously made. Yet, in pushing against

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 22

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23

<sup>15</sup> I would argue that all western developmental theory is a function of a largely white, middle/upper-middle class social location.

<sup>16</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 45.

<sup>17</sup> See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950).

these structures, adolescents grant them authority in the meaning making task.

Adolescents have the ability to envision alternative structures, but they haven't the power or the capability to affect the actual creation of new meaning making forms. Still confined within the white middle/upper-middle class social constructions of family, peers, school, extra-curricular sports/clubs and possibly, their Church youth groups, adolescents discover the finitude of the multiple authorities in their meaning making. As adolescents become emerging adults, they find themselves faced with the complex task of composing a meaning making structure beyond the limitations of the known authorities of their previous life experience.<sup>18</sup>

Emerging adults crash head-on into the challenges our culture poses to our ability to make meaning as adults. Developmental psychologist, Robert Kegan, observes that the work of becoming an adult in the white, middle/upper-middle class social location now “demand[s] something more than mere behavior, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of certain knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> He argues that the complexity of meaning making in our culture requires that “each person, in adulthood, create internally an order of consciousness comparable to that which would ordinarily be found at the level of a community’s collective intelligence.”<sup>20</sup> This is a daunting task. Educator Sharon Daloz Parks defines this task more concretely:

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<sup>18</sup> See William Perry, *Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development during the College Years: A Scheme*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999.)

<sup>19</sup> Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1994, 5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*,134.

The development of new technological vistas, complex chemical formulas including both medicines and biological weapons, and our ability to manipulate DNA all re-order our relationship to the earth and to each other, enlarging both our power and our vulnerability, and fundamentally threatening the arrangements of those matters that ultimately concern us. We are affected. We watch the delicate relationships among peoples and nations unravel and knit themselves into patterns, alliances dissolve, borders are redrawn, slumbering forces awaken with renewed strength. We understand our vulnerabilities to political realities, and we hope things won't get too far out of balance. Yet we know that our inner sense of a dependable universe can precariously shift upon hearing tomorrow's news.<sup>21</sup>

It takes time and experience to develop the critical skills necessary to compose a meaning making structure that is sophisticated enough to organize the complexity of knowledge our culture now requires and find the place of the self within it. The emerging adult period offers both the time and the testing of experience necessary to make the cognitive leap into this complex creation of new meaning making demanded above.<sup>22</sup>

In his book, *the Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*, Kegan observes that the development of human consciousness – the structures of knowing - throughout the life cycle takes place within a struggle to orient between two poles of the self:

These two orientations I take to be expressive of what I consider the two greatest yearnings in human experience . . . One of these might be called the yearning to be included, to be part of, to be close to, to be joined with, to be held, admitted, accompanied. The other might be called a yearning to independent or autonomous, to experience one's distinctness, the self-chosenness of one's directions, one's individual integrity.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 72.

<sup>22</sup> I do not have the space to explore this theme further in this particular paper, but the demand placed upon adults for critical consciousness in white middle/upper-middle class context suggest that a lengthy period of time to develop critical thinking beyond formal operations of the brain is necessary. While it is clear that the time to engage in this lengthy period of meaning-making exploration is a function of white economic privilege, the emerging adulthood period may also be a function of the demands placed on adult knowing and the brain development necessary to create this level of consciousness may take the time and experience of the emerging adult period to emerge.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Kegan, *The Emerging Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1982) 107.



Perhaps at no other point in the life cycle is the tension between autonomy and affiliation, separation and inclusion, isolation and interdependence more pronounced than in the emerging adulthood period. While there is great freedom in being able to explore and claim for oneself the orientation to these different poles of relationship, there is also fear of losing the relationships and the structural authorities that have previously anchored the meaning making task.

Parks describes both the joy and the sadness of the meaning making challenge in emerging adulthood:

There is deeply felt gladness in an enlarged knowing and being, and in a new capacity to feel and act. But here we must resist any temptation toward glib piety . . . when we wash up on a new shore of knowing, there may be diminishment as well as enlargement. Something is always lost.<sup>24</sup>

While the ability to make meaning for the self in new and more complex ways encourages exploration during the emerging adult years, the loss of the previous meaning making structures creates the uncertainty and vulnerability of this period. Arnett describes emerging adults as “aware of being in a period of exploration, of not yet having made the choices that will provide the foundation for their adult lives, and this awareness makes them feel in-between, no longer adolescent, but not yet fully adult.”<sup>25</sup> He articulates the tension of “the winding road” of the late teens through the late twenties by reminding us, “Emerging adults struggle with uncertainty even as they revel in being freer than they ever were in childhood or ever will be once they take on the full weight of adult responsibilities.”<sup>26</sup> How can those of us responsible for faith formation in Christian churches support emerging adults’ increasing ability to make meaning during this lengthy

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<sup>24</sup> Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 29-30.

<sup>25</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

period of the life cycle, while at the same time providing them with an environment that provides a stable place to mentally stand thus anchoring the instability of the period?

Kegan notes that, “People grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge.”<sup>27</sup> Parks comments further, “We develop the capacity – the structures – to think and feel in increasingly complex ways only if the situations we encounter present us with both the challenge and the resources to do so.”<sup>28</sup>

How, then, does the Christian community of faith best offer emerging adults both “the challenge and the resources” that will encourage exploration while at the same time, anchor the experience of instability at this developmental stage in the life cycle?

Kegan believes that “the evolution of our structures of knowing,”<sup>29</sup> at any stage of the life cycle is a process best fostered by the use of metaphor:

Metaphorical language offers the benefit of engaging the left and the right side of the brain simultaneously, combining the linear and the figurative, the descriptive and the participative, the concrete and the abstract. A metaphor is interpretive, but it is an interpretation made in soft clay rather than cold analysis. It invites [us] to put [our] hands on it and reshape it . . .<sup>30</sup>

Kegan observes that metaphors are both “cognitive and psychodynamic.”<sup>31</sup> Offered during the emerging adult period, metaphors meet emerging adults where they are and through engagement with them, provide both an anchor for the instability of this period and a challenge to explore self, others, tradition and culture.

The Christian Scriptures are the story of God’s people’s meaning making struggle toward faith over the long course of human experience. As the inheritor of these

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<sup>27</sup> Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

narratives, the Christian Church has a tremendous gift to offer young men and women in the emerging adult period of life. What transformative metaphors can the biblical narrative and the community of faith provide to our emerging adults? Before we can explore answers to these questions, we must understand the role of religious faith in the meaning making of emerging adults.

### **What Do Emerging Adults Believe About the Role of Religious Faith?**

In the search for that in which they can have faith and to which they can be faithful, religious institutions – their beliefs, practices, stories and teachings – tend to have little or no role in the meaning making occurring in the emerging adult period. In a seminal article entitled, “*A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults*,”<sup>32</sup> Jeffery Jensen Arnett and his partner, Lene Arnett Jensen, studied 140 emerging adults ages 21 to 28 in a variety of life settings: most single, some not, some parents, most not, some full-time students, some part-time students and some who were not students at all. The study took place in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. They note that there “was a broad range of variability in the social class of the participants’ families of origin, as indicated by father’s and mother’s education.”<sup>33</sup> Within the context of the study, they ask the question, “What do emerging adults in American society believe about religious issues?”<sup>34</sup> The results of the study indicate that emerging adults “believe whatever they choose for themselves.”<sup>35</sup> Digging more deeply into this issue, Arnett writes in *Emerging Adulthood*:

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<sup>32</sup> Jeffery Jensen Arnett & Lene Arnett Jensen, “*A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults*,” *Journal of Adolescent Research*/September 2002.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

One reason the beliefs of many emerging adults are highly individualistic is that they value thinking for themselves with regard to religious questions and believe it is important to form a unique set of religious beliefs rather than accept a ready-made dogma . . . [Many emerging adults] see it as a personal responsibility to develop a set of religious beliefs uniquely their own.”<sup>36</sup>

This holds true for those raised within the faith community as well as for those who have no experience of religious formation:

In statistical analysis, there was *no* relationship between exposure to religious training in childhood and *any* aspect of their religious beliefs as emerging adults – not to their current classification as agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal believer, or conservative believer; not to their current attendance at religious services; not to their views of the importance of religious attending religious services, or the importance of their religious beliefs, or the importance of religion in their daily life; not to their belief the God or a high power guides their lives or to the certainty of their religious beliefs in emerging adulthood . . . Something changes in between adolescence and emerging adulthood that dissolves the link between the religious beliefs of parents and the beliefs of their children.<sup>37</sup>

Arnett identifies several reasons that speak to the need emerging adults have to claim their right to be a “congregation of one”<sup>38</sup>:

In the course of growing up, people gradually became exposed to more and more influences outside the family. Going to college, especially, can challenge the religious ideas that emerging adults learned in their earlier religious training.<sup>39</sup>

But Arnett stresses that there is more than exposure to new ideas that drives the movement toward individualistic religious beliefs in the emerging adult period:

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<sup>36</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 172

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>38</sup> Jeffery Jensen Arnett & Lene Arnett Jensen, “A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults, *Journal of Adolescent Research*/September 2002.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

Even more important is the responsibility emerging adults feel to decide for themselves what they believe about religious questions . . . “making independent decisions” is near the top of the list of criteria that emerging adults consider most important for becoming an adult. This includes decisions about religious beliefs. For most emerging adults, simply to accept what their parents have taught them about religion and carry on the same religious tradition as their parents would represent a kind of failure, an abdication of their responsibility to think for themselves, become independent from their parents, and decide on their own beliefs. Quite consciously and deliberately, they seek to form a set of beliefs about religious questions that will be distinctly their own.<sup>40</sup>

Arnett reminds us that emerging adults are “developing an ideology, a world view, a way of making sense of the world.”<sup>41</sup> While religious beliefs may be part of the individual emerging adult’s worldview, he observes, “The world view formed by emerging adults includes not only a set of responses to religious questions, but also a set of values, that is, moral principles that provides a guide for making life decisions large and small.”<sup>42</sup>

Historically, the Christian Church’s sacred stories have offered meaning making metaphors that support and encourage the development of a world view; one that includes the formation of religious belief as well as offering “a guide for making life decisions large and small.” Can the metaphors of the Christian biblical narrative provide the fluidity and stability necessary to serve emerging adults as ground from which to explore and upon which they can securely stand as they seek to develop a world view in which they can believe and to which they can be faithful as they move into young adulthood?

### **Sharon Daloz Parks’ Metaphors of “Pilgrimage and Home”**

In her book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*, educator Sharon Daloz Parks adds depth to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 177

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 165

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 180

Arnett’s metaphor of the “long, winding road” by renaming the metaphor as “journey” in the emerging adult period:

Journey is a language of transcendence, crossing over, reaching and moving beyond. When we feel we are not yet *what* we ought to be, we are prone to feeling we are not *where* we ought to be. The journey metaphor can also convey a sense of movement down into, through, and beyond the swamps of confusion and despair.<sup>43</sup>

During emerging adulthood, this journey takes place within the changing orientations toward the different poles of relationship; in the increasing tensions between autonomy and affiliation, separation and inclusion, isolation and interdependence. Building on the work of Robert Kegan, Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow,<sup>44</sup> Parks summarizes the task of self-development for men and women:

For males, therefore the central task in becoming a self is separation or differentiation, going forth, heading out. In contrast, for females the task of becoming a self requires identification with, attachment, and connection . . . Thus the dance of self and other in the story of human becoming might be best understood as reflecting ‘two great yearnings’: one for differentiation, autonomy, and agency, the other for relation, belonging, and communion. There may well be a polar preference between the genders, but each gender has the capacity and the need to fulfill both yearnings.<sup>45</sup>

The emerging adult period is a time of experimentation when both young men and young women struggle to define for themselves their own unique orientations to the poles of autonomy and affiliation, separation and inclusion, isolation and interdependence.

Emerging adults are travelers, journeyers, adventurers. They set out to discover who they are in relation to others, to institutions, to culture and to the world itself. It may appear they are wandering without direction, but there is an underlying sense of purpose

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<sup>43</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> See Kegan, *The Evolving Self*, Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

<sup>45</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 51.

to their journeying. Parks defines the journeys of the emerging adult period as, “ventures . . . that enable [emerging adults] to become at home in the universe.”<sup>46</sup> She recasts the developmental task of emerging adulthood as a composition of new meaning making that is best encouraged by the metaphor of setting out on a pilgrimage of self-discovery and returning home with new knowledge of the relationship of the self to the home and the world :

Men and women alike know that a good life is composed of both venturing and abiding . . . If we embrace this larger concept of the story of human development we recognize the power of home places as well as the power of travel. The image of journey in the optimal story of human development is transformed into pilgrimage. The word *journey* is rooted in the French *jour*, meaning simply a day’s journey. A journey can be a profound and life-changing experience, or it can be endless without purpose. The practice of pilgrimage is a going forth and a return home that enlarges the meaning of both self and home.<sup>47</sup>

There is a destination for the pilgrimage that defines the developmental task of emerging adulthood; the claiming for the self one’s own meaning of and relationship to home – whether that home be within a family, a community or the world itself. In one form or another, emerging adults have left the homes of their adolescence. Some of them may have gone a great distance to dorm room or placement in the Peace Corps. Some of them may be living with friends or partners or have returned to the home of their family of origin, but for better or worse, the home with which they have had the greatest familiarity is the one they have left at the end of adolescence. Even though they may return to that home of origin, they return to it in the process of becoming a new self. And they find home changed because they are changing. The transformation in their meaning making that begins by setting out on the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood changes the

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

relationship made to home and those who dwell within it. Indeed, this pilgrimage leads emerging adults to the creation of their own meaning of home:

We are coming to realize that this becoming is not so much a matter of leaving home as it is it is undergoing a series of transformation in the meaning of home. We grow and become both by letting go and holding on, leaving and staying, journeying and abiding – whether we are speaking geographically, socially, intellectually, emotionally or spiritually. A good life and the cultivation of wisdom require a balance of home and pilgrimage.<sup>48</sup>

The metaphors of pilgrimage and home create intentionality and purpose for the emerging adult meaning making task.

Yet this intentionality implies uncertainty and instability. The understanding of self, others, tradition, culture and world is in flux during the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood. Pilgrimage challenges relationships, values and assumptions, and invites new meaning to be made through different experiences of and engagement with the object world. As stated above, during the adolescent period, the established structures of meaning making are pushed against, challenged and understood as limited. The developmental task of emerging adulthood is to compose meaning making “that can survive the defeat of finite centers of power, value and affection.”<sup>49</sup> The complexity of meaning making necessary as adults in our culture requires a period of testing and exploration to create the world view emerging adults will carry into young adulthood. It is within the emerging adult pilgrimage that the values and beliefs the adult self will live by are shaped, discovered and claimed. The pilgrimage of emerging adulthood is, in fact, one of faith development.

While our culture holds “faith” to be a religious term, Parks defines it much more broadly:

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 22.



All human beings compose and dwell in some conviction of what is *ultimately* true, real and dependable within the largest frame imaginable. Human beings, either unself-consciously or self-consciously, individually and together, compose a sense of the ultimate character of reality and then stake our lives on that sense of things.<sup>50</sup>

It is this “act of composing and being composed by meaning”<sup>51</sup> that Parks defines as “faith.” Spoken of in the “most comprehensive dimensions, [faith] . . . is a sensibility of life that not only transcends (is *beyond* us) but also permeates and undergirds our very existence (is *within, among and beneath* us).<sup>52</sup> While the search for meaning and for the values, relationships and institutions which are faithful to us and to which we can be faithful is part of each stage of development in the human life cycle, it is during the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood that faith is most tried on, examined, wrestled with and challenged. While faith must always “bear the test of lived experience in the real world”<sup>53</sup> throughout our lives, that testing takes places most intensely on the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood. The faith that is formed in the “on-going dialogue between self and world, between community and lived reality”<sup>54</sup> creates stability that allows emerging adults to live with the changing sense of home that is discovered, created and owned at the end of the emerging adult years.

The metaphors of both pilgrimage and home are familiar ones in the Christian biblical narratives. The Christian scriptures are filled with the meaning making of those who have left home before us, undertaking pilgrimages that tested their faith in their relationships with self, community, world and God, and who have transformed both the places and the meanings of home. The Christian biblical narrative is a rich resource with

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 20

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

which to support emerging adults if we are intentional about offering the stories of God’s people as “narrative portals of transformation”<sup>55</sup> that allow them to ground pilgrimage in purpose and to discover a lasting home within the community of faith. But before we can share our biblical stories of pilgrimage and home, we must develop a method that allows emerging adults to explore and make meaning of these texts for themselves. We cannot hand them the biblical stories with meaning already made. We must offer them in such a way that the emerging adult can engage them with their own experience on the journey of making meaning. How exactly do we do this?

### **The Role of Imagination During the Emerging Adult Period**

Meaning making is a multi-layered task involving thought, emotion, logic, yearning, and relationships throughout the life cycle. Meaning making composition in the emerging adult period follows the adolescent awareness that the previously experienced authorities are limited and finite. Parks observes:

To undergo the loss of certainty, to have to reorder what was presumed to be dependably real, involves emotion as well as cognition. Cognition and affect, mind and heart, are intimately interwoven in the fabric of knowing and integral to the fabric of faith.<sup>56</sup>

Meaning making in the emerging adult period requires that these young men and women:

live with a growing awareness that more depends upon us than previous generations have supposed – even as we are continually defeated in our attempts to entirely grasp, much less control, the full measure of the challenges and opportunities with which we now contend. . . Individually and collectively, we long for a trustworthy, dependable equilibrium in a dynamic, roiling world . . . We repeatedly assess our felt understanding of what is ultimately dependable (our ‘sense of God’).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Windsor, Elizabeth, *God’s Story and Our Story Narrative Portals of Transformation throughout the Life Cycle*, (unpublished doctoral thesis), 9Episcopal Divinity School, Cambridge, MA, 2009), 52-57.

<sup>56</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 71.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 72

It is from within this complex external and internal dynamic that our emerging adults embark on their pilgrimage of adult meaning making. The ground shifts continually under their feet as they journey. An inner authority – what Parks has defined above as “faith”- must be developed in the face of challenge and uncertainty. While the definitions of home change and expand within the emerging adult period, something concrete and dependable must come to be within the self that holds a sense of home – a place to belong and to be known - even as the understanding of home is transformed on the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood. In making the meaning that will move the emerging adult from the certainties of adolescence, through the testing of values of emerging adulthood, to the chosen world view that will be carried into the young adult period of life, something must support the emerging adult that will both anchor and encourage the meaning exploration of their pilgrimage.

Robert Kegan names this support “a holding environment.”<sup>58</sup> He describes this environment as “an evolutionary bridge, a context for crossing over. It fosters developmental transformation, or the process by which the whole (‘how I am’) becomes gradually a part (‘how I was’) of a new whole (‘how I am now’).<sup>59</sup> In emerging adulthood, this meaning making container must carry within it the trustworthiness and grounding of home, as well as making room for and encouraging the challenges of pilgrimage. Parks names this container “the faithful imagination”<sup>60</sup>

Whether or not religious terms are chosen by the emerging adult to define this “faithful imagination”, whether or not the emerging adult is a part of a religious tradition, the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood is theological at its root:

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<sup>58</sup> Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>60</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 103

The [emerging adult] is making meaning and doing the hard work of theology: exploring, understanding and naming self, world and “God.” Every person who is an [emerging adult] in the development of faith must begin to do this work, sorting out reality on the largest canvas he or she can conceive. It is an on-going act of imagination – the highest power of the knowing mind.<sup>61</sup>

Parks understands “faithful imagination” as a three-dimensional power:

First, imagination is a process. It is the power by which we move from faith to faith . . . Second, an act of imagination is an act of naming. By employing images, we name self and world and conceive the ideal, the worthy, the good—as well as all that is toxic and destructive. Images are the *content* that the underlying structures of thought hold. Images lend their form to name and hold our experience, thus they participate in giving form to faith . . . It makes a difference whether one feels the universe is loving, indifferent, hostile or however the [emerging adult] might name it . . . Third, by the power of imagination human beings participate in the on-going *creation* of life itself, for better or worse birthing new realities into being. We create forms of political community and economic life, produce communication technologies, design new architectural expressions, develop religious expression, envision medications, compose music, discern theories of the origin of the universe, and invent ways of playing and ways of making war.<sup>62</sup>

Parks insists that “it is by means of the imagination that we entertain the great questions of our time and craft the dreams we live by.”<sup>63</sup> The power to imagine is an awesome one, full of potential for both good or ill. The images held in the mind of emerging adults invite them to not only name the world as they find it, but to participate in the creation of the world as it might be. Thus, it matters what images, stories and metaphors shape emerging adult imaginations for they will form the world view that will be carried into young adulthood. Parks cautions:

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 104-105.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Images can carry us into communion with the sublime, and they can also get us into trouble. Understanding the power of image in its use as symbol and metaphor leads us to the critical insight that every image functioning as a bearer of inner life and insight is at once true and untrue. Since the image only gives *form* to the truth it attempts to convey, it can only *represent* the truth; it cannot fully reproduce or embody it . . . all images , as well as the words, concepts symbols, stories and rituals that derive from them, are merely forms we employ to handle reality.<sup>64</sup>

Many, if not most, of the images provided in our white, middle/upper-middle class context are not symbolic and therefore, do not invite emerging adults into a meaning making experience that reveals a depth of purpose and intention toward “communion with the sublime.” Emerging adults are inundated with images that trivialize relationships as commodities, fragment meaningful thought into sound bytes and suggest that success is measured by the things one can amass – whether those are possessions, graduate degrees, promotions and/or people.

The pilgrimage of the emerging adult years is a journey in search of symbols that “orient [them] to the whole of life.”<sup>65</sup> They hunger for revelatory images by which both they and the society in which they live can be transformed. Parks describes these images as “powerful enough to shape into one the chaos of existence –powerful enough to name a community’s conviction of the character of the whole of reality that its members experience as both ultimate and intimate.”<sup>66</sup> As emerging adults test values through experiences gained on their pilgrimages, they become aware of the truth expressed by theologian, H.R. Niebhur:

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 119

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 118

The participating self cannot escape the necessity of looking for pattern and meaning in its life and relations. It cannot make a choice between reason and imagination, but only between reasoning on the basis of adequate images and thinking with the aid of evil imaginations . . . anyone who affirms the irrationality of the moral and religious life simply abandons the effort to discipline this life, to find right images by means of which to understand oneself, one’s sorrows and one’s joys.<sup>67</sup>

Images that invite emerging adults into the experience of revelatory insight encourage them to “to see the whole of life in a way that previously eluded [them].<sup>68</sup> Thus, the images and symbols offered to our emerging adults as meaning making containers matter, because through these images and symbols, their adult reality will be composed.

The stories told in the Christian Scriptures function as both images and symbols. These stories embody the faithful imagination at work. Through them, our emerging adults are offered the power to compose reality that comes through engagement with deep images of human experience in search of ultimate reality. The Christian Scriptures have tremendous power to both wound and heal. Offered with intentionality by the faith community to the specific developmental tasks of the emerging adult period, these images can be tested, explored, interpreted, critiqued, tried on, played with and re-formed. These images can engage emerging adult imagination, serving as “both a filter and a lens”<sup>69</sup> that anchors the pilgrimage in search of meaning and the changing definitions of home along the pilgrim way.

It is our job as Christians further along on the pilgrimage to offer the stories. We must be confident enough of the power within them to let emerging adults make meaning of these stories as they will. Arnett reminds us that, “the beliefs of many emerging adults

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<sup>67</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, (New York: Macmillian, 1952), 96.

<sup>68</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 119.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

are highly individualistic”<sup>70</sup> and that “they value thinking for themselves in regard to religious questions.”<sup>71</sup> It is the job of Christian adults, mentors, educators and pastors to gently share these stories as the heritage of meaning making passed from one generation to another. Our role is to offer the biblical stories as places of dialogue, not dogma. We are to extend welcome into a community of meaning makers through these stories while leaving space for emerging adults to wrestle with the multiple meanings that can be gleaned from them. Emerging adults “believe it is important to form a unique set of religious beliefs, rather than accepting a ready-made dogma.”<sup>72</sup> Permitting emerging adults to discover for themselves what is found in the biblical text brings them into conversation with wider Christian experience. In so doing, we create a “holding environment”<sup>73</sup> of Christian community in which emerging adults may be held and sustained while meaning shifts on the pilgrim way. We extend to them the gift of a home from which they may set out to explore on the pilgrim way and to which they may return changed and offer their gifts and understanding of how the world is and might become. In making the biblical stories their own, emerging adults develop a world view into which they invite us to journey with them – creating anew the communal meaning making that has sustained God’s people from the very beginning.

It is to a discussion of some of the stories we might offer to emerging adults that will have particular resonance to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood that I now turn.

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<sup>70</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Kegan, 43.

**Christian Biblical Images that Give Form to Faith during Emerging Adulthood**

The Christian Bible is rich in stories of pilgrimage and home. From the first home in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1), the people of God have been on a continual pilgrimage toward the “new heaven and new earth” (Revelation 21:1) God yearns to establish. As God’s people have sought to discern God’s purpose for their lives and make meaning of their own experiences, new homes have been established (Genesis 15: 13-21, Genesis 28:13-15) and lost (2 Kings 25), and understandings of home and family have changed (Matthew 10:35). God’s people have been on a pilgrimage that continually transforms understandings home and the relationship of the self to family, peers, culture, world, and God.

While the theme of pilgrimage and home runs steadily through the entire biblical text, there are specific stories that speak to the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood which have been defined above by Jeffery Jensen Arnett; the exploration of the self and its relationship to family, peers, tradition, culture, world and ultimate reality, the instability created by the realization that previous authorities are limited, the awareness that the self is no longer who it once was, but is not yet what the self will become and the possibilities created by these shifting relationships.<sup>74</sup>

Most often, the first place emerging adults experience the shift in their relationships is within that with their parents. Arnett describes the process:

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<sup>74</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 45.



Just as emerging adults come to see their parents as persons and not merely parents, so parents come to see their children as persons and not merely their children. These changing perceptions on both parts allow parents and emerging adults to establish a new relationship as friends and near equals.

Still, this change does not take place overnight, but occurs gradually through emerging adulthood. The feeling of in-between that so many emerging adults have,, that feeling of being no longer adolescent, but not yet fully adult, is rooted in the changes taking place in their relationship with their parents.<sup>75</sup>

The change in the parent-child relationship is not accomplished all at once, nor is it a process without bumps.

There are several biblical stories that reveal experiences of changing parent-child dynamics. In John’s Gospel, we are given a glimmer of a mother recognizing that her son is ready to emerge into his adult work. Jesus and his family attend a wedding at Cana. In the course of the festivities, the wine runs out. Mary, Jesus’ mother, reports this to Jesus, “They have no wine” (John 2:3). Jesus –still not sure about who he is in relationship to his community and his role within it – responds to his mother, “What concern is that to you and me? My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4). Mary does not argue with Jesus. She does not tell him what to do; rather she shifts the dynamics by telling the servants, “Do whatever he tell you” (John 2:5), leaving the choice of acting or not to Jesus. Jesus does act – he turns the water jars for the Jewish rites of purification into fine wine (John 2:7-11), his first public miracle. Mary supports her son’s gifts, while at the same time, permitting him to make the choice of who he will reveal himself to be to his community. She encourages Jesus’ pilgrimage of self-discovery. Presented to our emerging adults, this story offers them the opportunity to examine the role of their own parents in their lives and in their pilgrimage of self-exploration.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48.

A different parent-child dynamic is revealed in the story of Joseph, the dreamer. We are told that Joseph’s father “loved Joseph more than his other children because he was the son of his old age” (Genesis 37:3). Joseph has the gift of interpreting dreams and not only are his siblings uncomfortable with this gift, so is his father. Telling his father and his brothers of a dream, Joseph is chastised by his father, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” (Genesis 37:10). In refusing to acknowledge the gifts in the emerging adult Joseph, his father leaves Joseph in a position to be betrayed by his siblings. Sent by his father to find his brothers who are tending sheep, Joseph is first thrown in a pit and left to die by his brothers and then, sold into slavery by them (Genesis 37: 12-28). For those emerging adults in difficult relationships with their parents (and siblings), this story offers a place to wrestle with parental refusal to see and support their developing gifts and skills on their pilgrimage of self-exploration.

The Christian Bible tells stories of changing relational dynamics between parents and children, but also between siblings. The story the twins, Jacob and Esau, is another such story in which we find both changing relationships with parents and among siblings. Esau is his father’s favorite; Jacob his mother’s (Genesis 25:28). The rivalry between the siblings causes Jacob to force his older twin, Esau, to renounce his birthright (Genesis 25:31-34) and Jacob, with the assistance of his mother, to steal his father’s blessing (Genesis 26:1-40). The conflict between the brothers, and parental playing-off of the brothers against each other, causes Jacob to flee for his life.

Jacob sets off on a journey of experiences that encompasses many of the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Among the relationships that emerging

adults must explore are their sexual partnerships and their future life as a worker. Arnett observes:

In love, as we have seen, the first explorations begin in adolescence, but explorations become more serious and enduring in emerging adulthood. With work, too, emerging adulthood is a time when choices become more serious, The stakes riding on those choices become higher, the foundation for adult life is being laid. And with work as with love, emerging adulthood is a time not only of exploration, but instability.<sup>76</sup>

With his parents' blessing on his ears, Jacob flees his home before Esau can carry out his plans to kill him (Genesis 27:14-28: 5). Sent to his mother's extended family to choose a wife, we can imagine the anxious feelings Jacob must have experienced about whom he is to marry and the work that he will do. And yet, along his pilgrim way, Jacob has an encounter with God that anchors him in a new found sense of home that he will carry with him through this period of instability as he deals with issues of love and work.

God comes to Jacob in a dream at Bethel and promises, “Know that I am with you and I will keep you wherever you go” (Genesis 28:15). Placing his faith in this promise, Jacob continues his journey and meets his future wife, Rachel at the well where she waters the sheep herd her father, Laban has given her to keep (Genesis 29: 9-12). Jacob falls in love with Rachel and agrees to serve Laban for seven years as her bride-price (Genesis 29:18-20). We cannot know exactly what these years were like for Jacob as he learns to care for Laban's flocks and develops his relationship with Rachel, but we can suspect that he wrestles with the responsibilities of his coming marriage and the onset of his adult responsibilities to support a family and contribute to the welfare of his community. Having served Laban for seven years, Jacob is tricked by Laban and given,

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 143144.

Leah, the elder daughter, in place of her sister, Rachel. Jacob must work another seven years to pay off his debt to Laban for Rachel (Genesis 29: 21-30).

Within the Jacob cycle of stories, emerging adults find a companion also wrestling with the changing relationships to his parents, his sexual partners and his work. Emerging adults can also identify with the struggle for meaning that is raised in these stories.

Along with the challenges presented to the more concrete tasks of love and work, Jacob's story is full of exploration of that in which Jacob can place his faith, of that which is ultimately trustworthy in his life. In conflict with his brother and betrayed by his father-in-law, Jacob must struggle to find meaning in his experience and develop “a faith that can survive the defeat of finite centers of power, values and affection.”<sup>77</sup> Arnett points out that the “the third pillar of identity, along with love and work, involves developing an ideology, a world view, a way of making sense of the world.”<sup>78</sup> During his pilgrimage of exploration in love and work, Jacob comes to rely upon the promise God made to him at Bethel. God's promise to Jacob runs throughout the story. Although Jacob has been driven from his home, God's presence and promise are carried within in him and on his pilgrim way, Jacob undergoes, in Sharon Daloz Parks' words, “a series of transformations in the meaning of home.”<sup>79</sup> Having left his parents' home at the end of adolescence, Jacob's emerging adult pilgrimage leads him through a series of homes - as Laban's kinsman and employee while he serves his seven years working for Rachel, the homes he shares and makes with Leah and Rachel, and finally, as an established adult with wives, children and flocks of his own, Jacob flees from the control of his father-in-law and returns to the his parents' lands to establish his own home (Genesis 30-35). On this

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<sup>77</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 22.

<sup>78</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 165.

<sup>79</sup> Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 51.

pilgrimage of return to home, Jacob must resolve his difficult relationships with both his father-in-law (Genesis 31:22-55) and his brother, Esau (Genesis 33). Jacob's faith in God continues to grow during this period of time. After wrestling with God's angel at Peniel (32:22-32), the marked and now mature Jacob finds his God to be trustworthy. He then is called to return to Bethel – where he first encountered God for himself – to establish his adult home (Genesis 35:1).

The Jacob cycle of stories offers emerging adults an extended series of metaphors of pilgrimage and home through which they may wrestle with their own life experience as they search for what will be ultimately reliable to them and in which they may have faith. Just as Jacob explores his relationships with parents, sibling, employer, sexual mates, his culture and his God, so too must our emerging adults. Jacob can be a companion in meaning making on the pilgrim way.

I offer this extended exploration of the Jacob stories to demonstrate the ways in which the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood can be found in the Christian biblical narratives. Both the Old and New Testaments are full of the stories of pilgrimages that reveal changing understandings of home as relationships with parents, siblings, sexual partners, peers, work, culture, society and God are explored during the emerging adult period. Yet, we are left with the question of who has the expertise to share these stories to our emerging adults and the contexts in which these stories can be offered to them. I conclude with some recommendations as to how the Church might serve as a meaning making container for those on the pilgrimage of emerging adulthood.

## Conclusion

While the Christian biblical narrative is rich in metaphors that speak to the developmental tasks facing emerging adults, it is clear from the research of Arnett and Jensen discussed above, that emerging adults are not are not in our pews on Sunday mornings waiting for the Christian Church to pass on its stories to them. Churched or not during childhood and adolescence, Arnett reminds us that one of the central developmental tasks of emerging adulthood is to “decide for themselves what they believe about religious questions.”<sup>80</sup> While emerging adults “seek to form a set of beliefs about religious questions that will be distinctly their own,”<sup>81</sup> the stories of the Christian Bible can be offered as a means of assisting emerging adults to formulate their questions and wrestle with the task of determining what can be relied upon as they choose for themselves the worldview to which they can be faithful in young adulthood. But those of us who are churched and who would share our biblical pilgrimages of faith will need to be creative in the ways in which we reach out to emerging adults.

I believe we will need a multi-pronged approach to reach those emerging adults living within our communities. In the still economically- privileged community of Sudbury, Massachusetts, where I serve in the United Methodist Church, we have a small core of emerging adults waiting for us to come and invite them in. Several of our families have emerging adult children who have gone off to college and have returned home for a variety of reasons. Many of them have had a positive high school Youth Group experience involving plenty of social service opportunities – and they remember it fondly. They aren’t in the pews on Sunday morning, but will make the effort to join us as

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<sup>80</sup> Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood*, 177.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

we engage in social justice work outside the building. Listening to them as we work side-by-side gives us the opportunity to hear their questions and to invite them to explore further with us. In our connections with these emerging adults either through these types of events or from their parents putting them in touch with us via social media, we have a small number of emerging adults that form the nucleus of a group. As we think about how we might serve these emerging adults on their pilgrimage of self-exploration, we hope to meet twice a month –building community by doing something fun or service-oriented during one meeting, and talking over a meal of some kind for the other<sup>82</sup> – building group trust and creating the environment in which they can be invited to share their questions and dreams while we offer in a dialogue format the stories of those in the Bible who have walked the pilgrim way ahead of them.

We expect the emerging adults to change the way we do things; particularly how we worship. I do not believe it is an accident that the study of the psychological stage of emerging adulthood is developing on a parallel path with what the liberal Church calls “emerging church.”<sup>83</sup> As generations change and the developmental tasks of life change, so too does our understanding of Church and our worship practices. The emphases of the emerging church movement on social justice, service to neighbors, reflection- in- community through a variety of artistic media including eating practices and storytelling, have the power to transform hearts – especially those of emerging adults who need community in which they can make meaning and test their world views. While the

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<sup>82</sup> Please do NOT underrate the importance of eating together. Our emerging adults are a generation that has largely grown up without the practice of the family dinner table. Sharing a meal and conversation over it is a need that emerging adults do not articulate, but to which they respond! And there are PLENTY of biblical stories that focus on the importance and the meaning made in eating together!

<sup>83</sup> See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith*, (Harper One: New York, 2006), Brian McClaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: 10 Questions that are Transforming the Faith*, (Harper One: New York, 2010) for studies of emerging church/worship.

emerging church movement is something too large to include in this paper, the changes that result in worship practice does offer a place for emerging adults to come together with others and experience the telling of the Christian biblical stories in ways that encourage independent thought and meaning making while still providing a community context for reflection. Dan Kimball, author of *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations*, describes the process of how the Christian story can be transmitted to a new community of seekers by restructuring worship, particularly the sermon:

The emerging approach to sermons is telling “the story of God” and inviting others into that story instead of outlining propositional principles out of the the Bible and turning them into sermon points. . . . Many times the emerging worship gathering is broken into parts. Instead of one long sermon, you’ll see the interaction of song or communal reciting of prayers in between sections of the sermon. Some emerging worship gatherings may allow people to actually get up and move to art stations to paint or draw or sculpt clay during the sermon. that way as they listen, they can create art that expresses what they are hearing.

The messages at these gatherings use a lot of humor. They are full of life and laughter and can be intensely passionate and convicting. At the same time they reflect the seriousness and humility because they are presented by a fellow worshiper struggling along in life like everyone else.<sup>84</sup>

In emerging worship, the exploration of meaning in the biblical story is a pilgrimage in which the entire community participates. The Christian biblical narratives are shared as “the ancient and living Word that the emerging church grapples with and wrestles with and turns to for guidance and light.”<sup>85</sup> Emerging worship offers emerging adults an ideal environment to explore their questions and concerns in dialogue with the Christian biblical narratives and offers a community of supportive others also engaged in the meaning making task.

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<sup>84</sup> Dan Kimball, *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations*, (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2004), 88-89.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



This style of worship may be attractive to emerging adult and will support their pilgrimage of self-exploration, but we have to get them in the building – or outside of the building in a communal area- to share it. At Sudbury United Methodist Church, we have a group of emerging adults already connected to our community, and therefore, a group with whom to begin the journey. As they find the Church a home from which to explore and return, they may just invite a friend or two along. But how does the Church share the gifts of its story and the space it creates to belong (both physically and metaphorically) during the emerging adult pilgrimage to those outside the community of faith?

As a United Methodist, the image of the circuit rider preacher comes immediately to mind. Our founder, John Wesley, believed that we were to share the stories of God where the people were – in coal mines and factories and public squares. His example is a model we must follow more closely now. The mission field is not the same –more likely it will be the coffee bar, the community life room of the local college or trade school, the pub on trivia night, or through social media – but the task of taking God’s story to the people where they are is the same. We create relationships not only over the coffee we enjoy around the tables at the local Starbuck’s or Dunkin Donuts, but also with the ones who make our coffee and hand it to us. Emerging adults are behind the counters as well as at the tables. Those of us who have the privilege of sharing God’s biblical narratives with the emerging adults must begin by creating relationships – even those which seem casual – that allow us to deeply listen to the yearnings of emerging adult hearts and to respond, “You know, that reminds me of a story . . .”

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