

Imagine a Church sermon series

#4 – Encourages People to Take the Next Step in Their Faith Journey

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We continue our sermon series this morning on our Vision and Mission statements, which can be found on the front of your bulletin. You may have noticed that there's a natural progression to the Mission Statement. We start by welcoming and accepting people into the church. We follow that by inviting people's questions, as they try and figure out how their faith impacts their life and vice versa. Then, we encourage them to take the next step in their spiritual journey, whatever that may be. That's what we'll be talking about today.

I had lunch with a retired minister this past week and we were talking about this sermon. He said, "So what is that next step?" I said, "Well, I don't know, it depends on the person." He said, "Well, how do they know what their next step is?" I said, "Well, that's what we try to help them figure out." He said, "How do you do that?" And I said, "Why are you asking me so many questions?" And he said, "What's wrong with a question? You said you invite them." And then he made me pay for the meal.

"We connect people to God and each other by encouraging them to take the next step in their spiritual journey." What is that next step? Our Vision Team was asked that question when we unveiled these statements in 2014. How do we encourage them to take the next step if we don't know what that next step is? The answer to that question is a part of the discovery process, as we listen to each other's stories, as we hear how our faith has been strengthened or challenged, and as we pay attention to the longing we hear for a closer connection to God and each other. But one thing is for sure: there's always a next step to take in our faith.

The rich young man in our story today is a good example. It's obvious he has already taken a number of steps on his spiritual journey. He's studied the material, he's followed the rules, and now he's ready for the final exam: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looks at him and loves him, because he knows this man has another step to take on his journey, a step that proves too difficult for him.

Not everyone is at far along on their spiritual pathway as this man. Some of us are life-long believers and church-goers; others may be coming back to church after a time away; and still others might not even be sure what they believe, if anything. Paul was aware of this when he wrote to the Corinthians. He knew they were fledglings in their faith, so he treated them as such, helping them discern the next step that was right for them. He wrote, "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food."

So where are you? Still nursing on spiritual milk? Ready to try the strained peas of the Spirit? Or are you far enough along for the BBQ Ribs of faith, the meaty stuff that helps us go deeper in our beliefs? Wherever you are, our mission statement calls us to provide an avenue for you to take that next step. As we consider how we do this, we need to keep in mind what I said last week about the changing nature of faith. Our faith used to be defined by what we believed. We assented to a certain set of spiritual principles and that defined what kind of Christian we were. Didn't really matter if we actually lived those out or not. Faith started with belief. You affirmed a certain set of beliefs and you were then a member of the church.

But how many other groups can you think of that require assent to beliefs before joining? Nowadays, people don't join a group by passing a test about what they believe. "So, you want to

join our poker group. Do you know when to hold ‘em? And, more importantly, do you know when to fold ‘em?” Belief is not a criteria for joining a group. People join a group by doing what group members do. For example, you don’t join a quilting club by promising to use an agreed-upon pattern or signing a contract that says you will only use certain kinds of stitches. You join a quilting club by quilting! You spend time with the group learning the craft, building relationships, completing projects, and before you know it, you’re a quilter.

That’s how I became a runner. I didn’t run the first time thinking I was a runner. I ran the first time because the quicker I reach my distance goal, the quicker I could celebrate with a milkshake. The next time I ran, I ran a little farther – and had a bigger milkshake. I kept running, a little at a time. I started talking to other people who ran to learn tips and techniques. Then one day, I looked back at how far I’d come and how many milkshakes I’d drank and I thought, “Wadda ya know? I’m a runner with a cholesterol problem!”

The point of these two examples is this: We no longer become Christians through an intellectual assent to a set of beliefs. We become Christians and grow as Christians by surrounding ourselves with other Christians and behaving like Christians. Actions shape our faith. We are what we do. Jesus’ followers didn’t listen to lectures. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward others and what to do in the world. They didn’t have to sign a covenant to be a part of Jesus’ followers. They simply had to follow what Jesus was doing.

Diana Butler Bass calls this the Great Reversal. In times past, people were taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. Do you believe this about Jesus and the Bible? Do you act like you believe this? Good, then you can belong to our church. But now, says Butler Bass, the script has been flipped. Now, it starts with belonging – sure, come join our group. It doesn’t matter if you have all the answers; just bring your questions. Then, behavior – you start acting like a follower of Jesus, serving the homeless or helping at VBS or caring for another person. And before you know it, you’ll find that behavior has resulted in belief about Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. From believing-behaving-belonging to belonging-behaving-believing.

This shift is reflected in how we welcome people into membership here at Crestwood. Traditionally, to join our church, you only have to answer one question: Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, and do you accept him as your Lord and Savior? If you believe this, then you belong. But how many of us know what that truly means? I don’t. So now, I ask this: Do you trust that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, do you accept him as your Savior, and do you promise to spend the rest of your life figuring out what that means? You belong, then you seek to understand what you believe.

That was certainly my experience starting out. I didn’t attend church regularly until college, and even then, I really had no idea what I believed. But I was welcomed into the church and allowed to participate and ask my questions. I started working with the youth group and we all learned about faith together. I can’t pinpoint a moment in my life when I said, “Ah, now I believe!” I simply happened, one Bible study at a time, one worship service at a time, one conversation at a time. I took the next step and God stepped with me.

If this shift to belonging first is true, then that changes how we as a church help people to move forward in faith. We not only need to provide the intellectual learning, we also need to provide the opportunity to practice what they learn. In other words, we need to balance learning about God with connecting to God through spiritual disciplines and hands-on service inside and outside the church. If we want people to become quilters, we need to show them how to quilt. If we want them to become followers of Christ, we need to show them how to follow.

That's an important point and one that I believe we often miss. Many people come back to church after time away because they want their children to have the same spiritual grounding and faith formation they had as children. But our kids are not the only ones who need spiritual nourishment. If we adults are also not striving to grow in our faith, then we are missing out on a huge part of our calling to be followers of Christ. The church gets precious few hours each week to help you kids and grandkids learn about Jesus. You get so many more. And they are watching you. If you're not taking your next step in faith, modeling for them what it means to follow, why would you expect them to do it? As followers, we are all supposed to be doing moving forward, learning and loving and leading and serving, just like Jesus.

This isn't always easy. Sometimes that next step – or first step – forward is the hardest. Just ask the young man in our story. That's why our Mission Statement says we "encourage" people to take the next step in their spiritual journey. That word literally means to give courage to someone, because sometimes taking a step in faith is really, really scary. It's not easy to walk into the sanctuary or a Sunday School class for the first time. It's intimidating to stand in front of a group of children or sing in the choir if you've not done it before. Whatever your next step is, you have a whole congregation here ready to encourage you. If you're not even sure what your next step should be, talk to us. We'll figure it out together.

Christianity didn't start with a confession or a statement of faith. It started with a rag-tag group of blue collar workers who were invited to belong to a community where they acted out what they saw and learned from the leader, Jesus of Nazareth. Only after belonging and behaving where they able to say, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." I guarantee you that there is someone in this sanctuary today that doesn't know if that's true. And on any given day, that could be every one of us. Our goal is not to make people believe this, but to help them experience it in life-changing ways by connecting them to God and to each other. It is through those connections that we learn what we believe is true.

Butler Bass says, "The disciples didn't hope the world would change. They changed it. And in doing so, they changed themselves." May we have that same courage, the courage to take the next step in our spiritual journey toward become the person and the people God has called us to be. Actions shape faith. We are what we do. So what is your next step?