

One Step at a Time

Luke 1:67-79, I Corinthians 9:24-27

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

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*To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2018/12/sermon12-09-2018.mp3>*

I suspect that if you've been here for the past few weeks, you'll have noticed that we've had a lot going on (evidently, more than even I knew about!). Communion. Congregational meetings. Baptisms. New Members. We started a new Advent practice of singing spirituals. Today many of the kids are on a retreat; we've heard an Epistle reading that talks about the race of discipleship that must have made sense to the ancient Greeks, who invented the marathon. We've listened to a Gospel story of an old man singing to his infant son about how that son would guide people's feet into paths of peace... When I get to a flurry of activity like this, the first question I need to ask myself is, "Well, what are we going to talk about?"



Let's start at the beginning. I suppose that there's a slim chance you could remember, but I doubt it. Who taught you how to stand up, and then to walk? Who coached you through that experience? Do you remember the precise exercises you did as you practiced rising, putting one foot in front of the other, and then maybe even tackled the stairs?

Of course not. In reality, by and large, *nobody* is taught how to walk. We just do it, right? Some of you were 8 months old. Others were 14 months old. Barring some sort of medical issue, every child eventually gets it, right?

And - you know this – watching a child who is figuring

this all out? It's hilarious. They pull themselves up on something, and they toddle along stumbling like drunken sailors until they arrive at the inevitable face plant... Most children do not need someone to teach them how to walk. Yet every toddler needs someone to encourage them – to remind them that they can do it – that they are, perhaps, better at it than they realize.



The Christian Life is often called “a walk”, and I think that in large part that's because it is easily understood as a place where – just as in our earliest experiments in mobility – innate ability, personal responsibility, and communal engagement come together.

Why do you follow Jesus?

Well, most of you would say that in large part, you're here because you *chose* to be here. You have responded to the gift of grace that was extended to you. Not many people are here – at least, not for long – if someone is “making” them come. When we shared communion last week, we noted that there was no such thing as a “force feeding” of the Gospel.

Here's another example that I suspect will resonate with many of us in the room. When you, or someone you loved, got sober or clean, how did that happen? Did anyone *make* you do it? My experience – which is limited, to be sure – is that healing from addiction cannot move forward without a decision and an act of the individual will. Some of you have told me that you got clean when you wanted to be clean *more than* you wanted something else. I've heard about how tired you were of seeing the pain, fear, or disappointment on the faces around you – your parents or your children, in many cases. Most of the time, moving towards wholeness begins with the day that the individual *chooses* to move.

But – and this is a big but – in situations involving dependency and addiction, the individual’s choice and sheer determination are not sufficient.

Unlike learning how to walk (which is a natural aspect of human development), entering the paths of faith can be more like coming out of addiction, seeking to lose forty pounds, or going back to school to get another degree. When one is going through such a complete change, the support of family and friends is essential. Many of you who have gone through such significant life changes have talked with me about the importance of having one particular person who can coach you as you look at the pitfalls and seek to gain strength.

Look, I realize that I can only push any analogy so far, but what I’m trying to get at is that most of us are here because we’ve heard something from the Lord, we’ve seen something in Jesus, we’ve sensed some movement in the Spirit and that has made us say, “Yes! That! I want that! I’ll run this race!” You and I are here because God was somehow active in our world and we responded to that activity and showed up.

So the more important question for today, then, is not “why do you follow Jesus?”, but rather, “how are we becoming a community of encouragement and care?” How are we treating each other – those who have joined us in running this race?



I know that every single person in this building has been in a room crowded with “grown-ups” who are watching a child take their first steps. How does any experienced walker behave in that situation?

You’ve been there: there’s a lot of cheering and celebration and even videotaping and recording, right?

How about here?

It seems to me as though it is impossible for us to think of ourselves as a community of care and encouragement if we are characterized by condemnation and ridicule. Think about it: can you imagine a grandparent belittling a two year old for stumbling down the hallway? Would a mature person study an 18 month old child's attempts to get from the living room to the kitchen and then post it on Facebook, saying, "Well, this kid's clearly an idiot. Yesterday, I thought we were getting somewhere, but today? Please. Looks like she's falling back into those old habits. What a loser. Steer clear of her – she looks pretty needy."? Of course not.

In the same way, an essential task of the church of Jesus Christ is to resist condemnation, share affirmation, and practice encouragement. Part of our organizational DNA is reminding people that they can be more than they thought they could. I'd like to try something with you. Right now, can you just put down whatever you're holding and just reach your hands high above your heads. Get them up there – as high as possible, and hold them there for a moment. OK. Got it? Now, listen to me, but watch your neighbor: I want you to reach higher.

You liars! I asked you to get your hands as high above your heads as you could, and you said you were doing that... but then when I asked you what was apparently impossible – reach higher – you did.

Listen: my point here is not that you can't be trusted... it's that each of us can probably accomplish more than we think we might be able to if we are given the right amount of encouragement and challenge. Let us pledge as a community to resist the temptation to condemnation and judgmentalism and embrace our identity as we become those

who encourage.



Another thing that any competent adult would do when encouraging a toddler to walk is clear the path. When Sharon and I are trying to get Violet to trust her legs and balance more, we pick up laundry and close the gate to the fireplace

and so on.

As we are joined by sisters and brothers who are eager to run the race of faith, can we create worship and discipleship experiences that remove obstacles and hindrances for others? Maybe it's providing child care. It could be taking a good look at musical styles or the language we use. In any case, it's the responsibility of those who are better at walking to make sure that the pathway is as clear as possible. And I shouldn't need to say this, but I will: when we do this, we don't gripe about it. When your friend was rehabbing from his accident or your daughter was learning to walk, you didn't moan and groan about how you had to make sure that the laundry was picked up before they tried to walk across the room – you did it, and you were happy to do it because you love that person more than you love the things that are laying the path, right?



There's one more thing I'd like to say about creating a vibrant community of faith, and it's slightly counterintuitive. If we're talking about children learning to walk, we accept it as a given that the two year-olds are learning, and the sixteen or sixty year-olds know it all. We think that there is some sort of linear progression there, and we're probably right. However, as we engage in the walk of faith, we have got to remember that for each and every one of us, there is a lot to learn, and we must be open to learning from someone who is "younger" in one

way or another than we are. Our Gospel reading today showed us a father who was expecting his son to teach him great things; our Epistle was written by Paul, who was one of the best-educated men of his generation – and yet who was nurtured and taught by, and learn from, a group of illiterate fishermen.

When I show up at meetings with other pastors, they sometimes give me grief because I still work with the Youth Group. “Come on, Carver,” they say. “Time to get out of that. That’s a young person’s job.” Maybe. But I love watching the face of a young person figuring some of this out for the first time. I am constantly encouraged by – and learning from – the children and young people in our community. I have learned far more about being fearless from young people than I have from those older than I; children have taught me to use my imagination; and in recent years I’ve seen young adults push me closer to the heart of Jesus than I might go on my own. I’m grateful for the chances I have to teach, and yet I’m more grateful for the many opportunities I’ve had to learn.

“Guide my feet while I run this race” is not merely a prayer wherein I ask God to give me some special coaching; it is a cry for community. We come in here and we tell each other that we’ve been out there doing it – whatever “it” is – and we cheer for each other, we hold one another’s troubles, and we remember that this is a good place – the right place – for us to be. Thanks be to God for a community that is vibrant and growing. Amen.