

Message: Cultivating Commitment

Are you cultivating commitment?

The question is a good one, but I'll bet you're sitting there trying to guess what I'm really asking. There are a couple of ways to answer.

Let's try it this way: how are you inviting others to follow Jesus?

Ah, ha! Now I've got it, pastor. You're asking me to be an evangelist. Well, I have a problem with that. That's not my gift. And you know how everybody feels about evangelists – they're *creepy*! I mean, have you seen that guy with the sandwich boards down on Ontario Avenue?

No way! Never.

“All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them”
(Luke 9:23-24, CEB).

Jesus doesn't ask “will you ...?” That's what you ask a fan.

Jesus asks “how are you ...?” That's what you ask a follower.

You're thinking, “Please ask me to do something else. I'll clean the kitchen, mow the lawn or help in Sunday school. Heck, I'd even clean the bathroom! Anything else. Just don't ask me to tell someone about Jesus.” That's self-preservation kicking in. You know, fight or flight. We push back on the question or we try to avoid it by looking away or doing something else. In the worst case, we leave the church. I've heard people say, “I'm not going to attend THAT church. The pastor expects me to talk to other people about my personal, private faith.”

Jesus said, “All who want to save their lives will lose them.”

Running away is what fans do when the going gets tough. When your team is fading, when a popstar's fame loses its glitter, when your spouse fails you, when Jesus asks you to commit to a relationship, we run away. And we die inside a little bit each time. We become less aware of spiritual things. We're more comfortable with darkness. We're on a path that leads to half a life. We're beginning to live in fear. The more we're challenged, the more distant we feel from God.

Jesus said, “All who lose their lives because of me will save them.”

Followers hang in there when the going gets tough. When we’re frustrated, we trust Jesus. When we’re disappointed, we trust Jesus. When we have doubts, we trust Jesus. When we’re asked to invite others to follow him, we trust Jesus. We feel the prompting of God’s Spirit at times. We want to honor our vows. We’re more comfortable with light. We’re on a path that leads to a full life, lived with hope. We aren’t afraid of life’s trials. In fact, the more we’re challenged, the closer we feel to God.

We have to learn how to be committed. We aren’t born with it. We don’t automatically get it as a wedding gift. In fact, most newlyweds develop a dislike for the words “honeymoon phase.” It can imply a lack of acceptance by other couples, when it really has to do with the maturing of the relationship. After the marriage, life is romantic. It’s full of “firsts,” like the first Thanksgiving, the first Christmas or the first time you use the words “my wife” or “my husband.”

But then there’s the “first fight.” Making up was fun, but we know. Maybe it was over a simple thing, like toothpaste. We realize we have to overlook some things. The shocker comes about a year later. It might have been something like this ... maybe you walked into the living room one morning to find your spouse watching a sporting event, eating a bowl of cereal on the nice sofa. You notice your spouse has gained 10-15 pounds. As you watch, your spouse scratches their back with the spoon and then goes back to eating the cereal. You express your displeasure and ask them to change their behavior. After all, your spouse has met all your other requests.

On the other side, you’re enjoying a meal on the sofa when your spouse comes in. You notice that they’re wearing the most conservative pajamas you’ve ever seen. Their hair might be in disarray and there’s no sign of makeup. In fact, they remind you of your Mom. And, when they start complaining, you definitely hear your mother.

What’s going on? Life. It’s the definition of “for better or for worse.” You need to have someone show you how to cope. You need to learn how to love in a real, practical way. You need to learn how to cultivate

commitment. It would be nice to learn commitment in one day, but that isn't the case. That would be like giving birth to a fully grown adult. It doesn't happen. Babies are carried to term and then cared for, for at least 18 years.

Jesus is our spiritual parent. Jesus never fails and is always there to guide and care for us. You just have to develop the habit of turning to Jesus when things are going sideways. When Jesus is at the center of your life, you'll learn that the best way to care for the people close to you is through love. No matter how hard it may get, love is the antidote to fear.

That's what Jesus wants you to share. Me, too.

Jesus gave his followers one command, *“Love one another as I have loved you”* (John 13:34). Love builds relationships that last. Love teaches us how find new joy in our life. Love gives us hope, especially when life is hard and filled with doubts, frustration ... even threats.

Luke recorded a time when Peter cultivated commitment (Acts 3).

“Peter and John were on the way to a prayer meeting one day at three o'clock in the afternoon. As they walked to the meeting, they saw a 40-year old crippled man by the church door. The man was begging the people going inside for money.

When they got close, the man asked them for a handout.

Peter and John stopped and looked him. Peter said, *‘Look here!’* The man looked up, expecting to get something. Peter looked him straight in the eye and said, *‘I don't any money, but I'll give you what I do have. In the name of Jesus Christ, walk!’* Peter grabbed the man by the right hand and pulled him up. Instantly, his ankles and feet were healed. The man jumped up and walked. The man was so excited that he went into the church with them, dancing and praising God. He threw his arms about Peter and John. Everyone saw and recognized him.”

They were amazed! People began to gather around them. Peter realized he had an opportunity and took it. The short form is this:

You killed Jesus.

God raised him from the dead.

Jesus is the only one who can save you.

Say you're sorry.

Peter ended with ... ‘It’s not too late. You can follow Jesus, too.’

What do you think happened next?

We read it in Acts 4. The church leaders called the police! They had Peter and John arrested for disrupting their service. They complained because Peter and John were telling people Jesus rose from the dead. Sure enough, the police came and threw them in jail for the night.

How did the crowd react?

Luke tells us, *“many of those who listened believed - in round numbers about five thousand!”*

The top political and church leaders were at the hearing the next morning. As Luke puts it, “everybody who was anybody was there.”

They asked Peter and John, “What are you doing?”

Do you think Peter was nervous? After all, he’s a fisherman standing in front of a courtroom full of judges, attorneys, politicians and pastors. Most of us would be. Who knows what would happen.

But Luke tells us something amazing.

In Luke’s words, *‘Peter, full of the Holy Spirit, let loose’*

Peter gave ‘em both barrels:

“We don’t have anything to hide. By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the One you killed on a cross, the One God raised from the dead, by means of his name this man stands before you healthy and whole. Salvation comes no other way; no other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved, only this one.”

You could have heard a pin drop.

All those powerful people sat there without saying a word. They couldn’t take their eyes off Peter and John. The two were so confident, so very sure of themselves! Their fascination grew when they realized the two were laymen with no training in Scripture or formal education. They recognized them as Jesus’ followers. But to see them standing there, so filled with confidence, and the crippled man they knew *standing* next to them, miraculously healed ... what could they say?

They can't refute the miracle or who did it.

They can't charge them with anything.

So, do you know what they did?

They threatened Peter and John. They told them, “don't to do it again.” They turned up the heat, saying, “If you ever use Jesus' name again, we'll punish you.” Then they let them go.

Have you ever had someone threaten you?

You know how it goes ... “I'm not comfortable when you talk to me about Christ. If you don't quit, then I don't want to come around.” The follow on is, “And I don't want you talking to my children.” At work, they might threaten to tell the boss or make fun of you in front of your co-workers. At school, they'll laugh at you in the lunch room or the hallways. At home, it might come in the form of criticism, silence or other forms of rejection.

What do you think Peter and John said? They talked back!

They said, “*Whether it's right in God's eyes to listen to you rather than to God, you decide. As for us, there's no question - we can't keep quiet about what we've seen and heard.*” After they left the courtroom, they celebrated what happened with their friends. Yeah, they had a party!

Jesus wants you to share your faith with others.

I know: it's a hard message to hear.

I'm here to equip, encourage and pray for you. I want to hear how it goes when you do share, no matter whether it's this week, when the family gathers next week or next month. No matter whether the response is positive or negative, trust Jesus. And then, let's celebrate.

Please don't go home and say, “Pastor told me you're a jerk. Sit down. I'm going to tell you about Jesus – right now!” There will be a time and a place. The Holy Spirit will prompt you and give you confidence. Keep one thing in mind when you do share. Jesus calls you to love others, just as he loves you. And Jesus gave his life for you, forgiving you as he did.

So speak the truth in love. When you do, sacrifice your own, personal objectives and discomforts to reach out with a message of hope and love. When you empty your heart in a loving way, you're letting go of yourself. When you do, a beautiful thing will happen. Jesus will fill you right back up with grace. Your heart will be strangely warmed. When that happens, you'll know: you're following Jesus.

Let us pray...

Gracious God, we come wanting to be close to you. We want all of the good things that come by your grace and mercy, yet we struggle to get past our own doubts. Fill us with a spirit of love, truth and give us the courage to share the message that you are our one and only. Give us the boldness to speak and grace for our tongues. Show us how to truly follow you, no matter what it may cost us. Jesus, we pray this in your name. Amen.

Acts 4:1-14 (CEB)

While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees confronted them. They were incensed that the apostles were teaching the people and announcing that the resurrection of the dead was happening because of Jesus. They seized Peter and John and put them in prison until the next day. (It was already evening.) Many who heard the word became believers, and their number grew to about five thousand.

The next day the leaders, elders, and legal experts gathered in Jerusalem, along with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and others from the high priest’s family. They had Peter and John brought before them and asked, “By what power or in what name did you do this?”

Then Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, answered, “Leaders of the people and elders, are we being examined today because something good was done for a sick person, a good deed that healed him? If so, then you and all the people of Israel need to know that this man stands healthy before you because of the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is the stone you builders rejected; he has become the cornerstone! Salvation can be found in no one else. Throughout the whole world, no other name has been given among humans through which we must be saved.”

The council was caught by surprise by the confidence with which Peter and John spoke. After all, they understood that these apostles were uneducated and inexperienced. They also recognized that they had been followers of Jesus. However, since the healed man was standing with Peter and John before their own eyes, they had no rebuttal.

Luke 9:23-24 (CEB)

Jesus said to everyone, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross daily, and follow me. All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me will save them.”