



20-Day Faith Forward Devotional

September 2023

First Presbyterian Church — Pittsford, New York

Embracing and Sharing Christ's Love

Table of Contents

List of Vision Team Members

Day 1 — September 10 — Leadership and Prayer

Day 2 — September 11 — Vision

Day 3 — September 12 — Calling

Day 4 — September 13 — Clarity

Day 5 — September 14 — Focus

Day 6 — September 15 — Purpose of Humanity

Day 7 — September 16 — Purpose of the Church

Day 8 — September 17 — Thirst for God

Day 9 — September 18 — Resurrection

Day 10 — September 19 — Whose Voice?

Day 11 — September 20 — The Unchurched

Day 12 — September 21 — Testify

Day 13 — September 22 — Evangelism

Day 14 — September 23 — Truth

Day 15 — September 24 — Belief

Day 16 — September 25 — Faith

Day 17 — September 26 — Sabbath

Day 18 — September 27 — Relational

Day 19 — September 28 — Mission

Day 20 — September 29 — Filtering the Noise

Faith Forward Vision Team Members

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Day 1

Sunday, September 10

Leadership and Prayer

First Presbyterian Church is in the middle of our strategic planning process (Faith Forward), and we're about to enter the Visioning Phase of the process. Our Vision Team will be leading us through this phase which begins at a retreat on September 30. There are 20 days between September 10 and the retreat. This 20-Day Faith Forward Devotional is meant to be a tool to prepare us for the Vision Phase. Each of these 20 days, our church will be unified in prayer – for its members, for our ministry, for our revitalization, for our Vision Team, and more. I am so excited to go with you on this journey of prayer for the next 20 days. Today, I would like to make the importance of leadership and prayer our focus.

Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no guidance, people fall, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” This Biblical proverb reminds us that leadership matters. The renowned leadership expert (and pastor) John Maxwell says, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.” As a church, we select leaders who will... well, lead us. That's their job, and we expect them to make faithful decisions on our behalf and we promise to follow them as they lead us. There's a reason why every time we ordain and install ministers, ruling elders, and deacons, the congregation makes a promise “to pray for [our church leaders], encourage them, respect their decisions, and to follow as they guide us, serving Jesus Christ, who alone is the Head of the Church.” Our leaders' jobs are so important which is why we also ought to pray for them.

Paul says in Philippians 4:6, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” When we cast our anxiety upon Christ, we discover that he cares for us, and we feel the peace that comes from trusting him (1 Peter 5:7). Are you anxious about the future of the church? I know I can be. Let's follow Paul's advice and pray for our Vision Team as they lead us through the Faith Forward process. They will be doing the important work of discerning and updating our church's mission, vision, and values, as well as helping us craft a “roadmap” outlining the path for us to live into our mission, vision, and values.

The members of the Vision Team are listed in the front of this devotional. Choose one or two of them each day, and lift them up in prayer each of these twenty days. I encourage you to use the following prayer:

Prayer: *Gracious God, I thank you that [Name(s) of Vision Team Member(s)] are leaders of this church. Please help them to know your voice and to become more like Jesus. May their leadership during Faith Forward help our church to become more vital and faithful, and may people in Greater Rochester and beyond know you and your love because of us. Amen.*

Day 2

Monday, September 11

Vision

Earlier in my life, I mowed lawns for a landscaper, and one of the company's customers had a huge front lawn that he insisted needed to be cut in perfectly straight lines. From the road to his house was probably an eighth of a mile, and mowing a straight line for over 600 feet is quite difficult. Here's what my boss-at-the-time taught me about making straight lines: "Don't look down at your mower deck or at the front of your tractor to see if you're driving straight. Look down the lawn at where you want your tractor to end up and focus on that spot, and then just start driving towards it. You are much more likely to mow wobbly lines or to veer really far off course if you don't have your eyes fixed on where you're going." And you know what, he was right. If I just fixed my eyes on where I wanted to go, I could open up the throttle on the tractor and drive a perfectly straight line. So I did, and the customer stayed happy.

Similarly, any organization, including churches, needs to know where they want to go or else they'll end up veering far off course. Knowing where you want to go is called "having a vision." Nashville-based pastor Andy Stanley has said, "Everybody ends up somewhere in life. A few people end up somewhere on purpose. Those are the ones with vision." Faith Forward is, in part, about discerning a vision for our church. Do we know what our priorities are as a church? Does every member of our church know what's expected of them? Is our vision compelling and something people can *feel* as much as understand? These are necessary questions to consider when crafting a vision. I don't want First Presbyterian Church to end up "any old place" in the future. Given the declining interest in religious institutions, churches can't afford to be so aimless. I want us to end up somewhere on purpose. I'm sure you do, too.

Questions for Reflection: Do you know the current vision of First Presbyterian Church? Would your answer be the same as anyone else's in the church?

Prayer: *God, guide the leaders of our church as they discern our way forward. Remind us all that our greatest priority is to seek you and your kingdom (Matt. 6:33). Help our leaders to create specific ways for us to be kingdom-minded people here in the Greater Rochester area. Amen.*

Day 3

Tuesday, September 12

Calling

I have known Christians who feel terrified by the idea of missing their calling from God and who, upon not receiving a supernatural sign about their next move at some decision point in their lives, have felt paralyzed, fearing that any move was a step down the wrong path, away from their calling. I have also known Christians who have stepped into unwise situations or made foolish decisions, simply because they “had a feeling” that convinced them that was the way to live into their calling. And I have known many more Christians who simply never considered the concept of calling at all, merely doing what they personally benefit most from, prefer, or are used to.

In his book *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner says that “the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet...”. He lays out a framework for determining, roughly, if you are living in the calling God has for you. There are two parts of this framework. The work God calls you to is “(a) work that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done.”

If you are doing something you love, but it is not serving the world, you are likely not living into your calling. If you are doing something that serves the world, but you hate it, you are likewise unlikely to be fulfilling your calling. The trick is to find work that both feeds your soul and feeds the world. I love this idea because it takes the idea of calling, something that can feel very esoteric and inscrutable and makes it much more concrete.

Questions for Reflection: Are you living into your calling? What about our church? Are we living in that sweet spot where the deepest needs here in Greater Rochester are being met by a ministry we are deeply glad to do?

Prayer: *God, help me to identify my calling as an individual. Help us to identify our calling as a church. Then, help us to make the hard decisions that may be necessary to make our calling a priority. Amen.*

Day 4

Wednesday, September 13

Clarity

Yesterday, we learned about a very simple and helpful definition of “calling.” John Collins, author of *Good to Great*, talks about a similar idea from a business perspective. He says that there is one primary thing that separates good organizations from the truly great organizations, and he calls it “the Hedgehog Concept.” In a nutshell, here is the Hedgehog Concept. Imagine a Venn Diagram with three circles. The first circle is 1) *what your organization is uniquely situated to do better than anyone else*. The second circle is 2) *what your organization does that gives it the most return on its investment*. The third circle is 3) *what your organization is deeply passionate about*. Where these three circles overlap should be a simple, crystal-clear concept of where that organization should focus its efforts. Collins calls it the Hedgehog Concept, because unlike other animals, hedgehogs are good at doing *one simple but very important thing* – rolling up into a ball of sharp spikes. A defense mechanism that always works.

What might a church’s Hedgehog Concept be? Well, let’s consider the Venn Diagram described above. 1) There are many organizations (for-profit and non-profit alike) that do many things in Greater Rochester – poverty assistance, hunger relief, social work, music performance, psychological counseling, etc. The organizations doing those things can probably do them better than a church ever could. What are one or two things that a church is uniquely equipped to do better than those other organizations? 2) Given that churches tend to be organizations that operate with large volunteer bases, how do we maximize all the resources at our disposal (people’s time, talent, and treasure) to create the biggest impact for our efforts? 3) What do we do as a church that gives our people energy and joy?

Questions for Reflections: Can you think of one thing that First Presbyterian Church does (or might do) that falls into these three categories? I can. Having that kind of clarity about our purpose might also just reveal our calling.

Prayer: *God, give us, as individuals and as a church, clarity regarding our purpose and calling. Help our efforts in serving you to be impactful in the lives of others and joyful for ourselves. Amen.*

Day 5

Thursday, September 14

Focus

Continuing our reflection from two days ago (about calling) and yesterday (clarity), today let's think about "focus." John Collins talks about great organizations having a Hedgehog Concept – a simple, crystal-clear concept of what that organization does really well, is passionate about, and can do efficiently. It's important that an organization has clarity about what that concept is. But just as important, it must have intentional and disciplined focus on that concept. Here's what I mean.

Imagine someone who makes the best cranberry-orange scones. Everyone who eats her scones says they are the best scones they've ever had. She happens to love making her scones (because they are an old family recipe) and is very efficient at making lots of them. She decides to start a business. She opens a bakery and business booms. Her bakery becomes instantly popular. She starts branching out and making different types of scones – chocolate-chip and coconut, blueberry, maple glaze. Customers begin requesting that she make other types of baked goods – cookies, muffins, and breads. The trouble is: she's not very good at baking those other things and she doesn't really even like baking those other things. But because the customers asked, she decides to do it. However, with less time to make her famous cranberry-orange scones, she can't make enough of them anymore. She decides to cut some corners just to increase the quantity, but the quality significantly suffers. Customers notice the difference and business dies down until she has to eventually close her bakery. Okay, this illustration is overly simplified, but I think you get my point. Sometimes the best thing we can do is say "No" to everything that isn't important. Put differently, truly great organizations say "No" to virtually everything that isn't part of their Hedgehog Concept. This is called "focus."

Apple Inc. is widely known as one of the largest and most innovative tech companies in the world. This is in large part due to the vision of one of its founders – the late Steve Jobs. Here is what Jobs said about having focus: "People think focus means saying yes to the thing you've got to focus on. But that's not what it means at all. It means saying no to the hundred other good ideas that there are. You have to pick carefully. I'm actually as proud of the things we haven't done as the things I have done. Innovation is saying no to 1,000 things."

As a church, I believe we need to get crystal-clear about what our Hedgehog Concept is, identify one or two ministries within that Concept, and then say "No" to virtually everything else. Sometimes faithfulness means refusing to do things that divert our attention from doing what is most important. Sometimes good is the enemy of great.

Questions for Reflection: Do you think our church is too busy? What do you think our church needs to let go of in order to have greater focus?

Prayer: *God, help us to be willing to make sacrifices in order to make room for what is most important. Amen.*

Day 6

Friday, September 15

Purpose of Humanity

There are contexts in which, if you were to voice the question “What is the chief end of man?”, you would receive the instantaneous and unison answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Maybe these words came to you instantaneously when you read that question, or maybe you have never heard that phrase in your life and are now parsing exactly what that archaic phrasing means. Those words were written in London nearly 400 years ago, in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, as a teaching tool primarily meant for children. It represents a simple exposition of Calvinist thought at the time and is still used and memorized in countless Reformed churches today.

So what is the primary purpose of humanity? According to the Catechism, the primary purpose of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. What a beautifully simple answer to a complex and existential question. To be honest, this is the most cogent and satisfying answer to this question that I have ever come across. Most other answers eventually boil down to: “Well, you have to create your own purpose, really.” To glorify God and enjoy God forever is broad enough that we can spend a lifetime exploring exactly what it looks like, while still being narrow enough that it gives a sense of simplicity and concreteness to a question that can feel daunting and esoteric.

It also makes clear something really important. Our purpose is to glorify God, not because God needs us or even particularly benefits from our actions, but because glorifying God is what we are meant to do and goes hand in hand with our own joy. Our purpose isn't “to glorify God and be miserable if that's what it takes.” Our purpose isn't “to glorify God and ignore our feelings because they don't matter anyway.” Communing with our Creator, acting in ways that bring glory to God, and enjoying being in God's presence is our purpose and our path to enjoying God fully. There is a level on which that is a high calling, and a level on which that is as place to rest.

Questions for Reflection: How do you know if you are glorifying God in your life? What about God brings you joy?

Prayer: *God, thank you that our purpose as humans is to worship and enjoy you. Help us to align the totality of our whole lives toward you, because that is where we discover our deepest and truest meaning. Amen.*

Day 7

Saturday, September 16

Purpose of the Church

Do you ever stop to consider what is unique about the church? There are certainly many positive things about church: life-long friendships, intergenerational community, uplifting music, service and mission opportunities, children's programming, education. But each of those things can be found elsewhere, in some form or another. People join book clubs, activist groups, classes, and social clubs for some of those same benefits. So why go to church?

It may seem so obvious that we almost miss it, but what makes us different is Jesus. We are here, together, despite our many differences, to love and follow Jesus. We aren't here because we share an interest in Civil War History or knitting or because we share similar views on immigration policy. We are here, and we are a family, because of Jesus. Because we have met him (or because we want to meet him), because we love him, and because he asked us to follow him and worship him together in community. Because we can help each other see him and know him and serve him better together than we can on our own.

The Second Helvetic Confession, found in our *Book of Confessions*, asks, "What is the Church?" and responds: "The Church is an assembly... of those who truly know and rightly worship and serve the true God in Christ the Savior, by the Word and Holy Spirit." Everything we do as a church ought to serve this purpose.

The next time we say the Apostles Creed together, reciting, "I believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints..." I hope you will think of this concept. What brings us together and what makes us unique is Jesus. Because of this, we are able to set aside not just our differences but also some of our similarities, remembering that we aren't here because of our political or economic preferences, because of our enjoyment of the same type of music, or because of our similarities in lifestyle and personal history. We are here because of Jesus. Let's serve him, love him, and make him known in our community.

Questions for Reflection: How are you helping others in the church to know Jesus better? How are others in the church helping you know Jesus better?

Prayer: *God, through my participation in your church, help me to become more like Jesus and to help others do the same thing. Guide our church until everything we are and do is about him. Amen.*

Day 8

Sunday, September 17

Thirst for God

My kids bring refillable water bottles to school each day. All kids do now. It's as basic a school supply as a backpack. That wasn't the case when I was in school. I may have brought a water bottle to my baseball games but never to school. What did we do instead? Probably drink some sugary juice or chocolate milk at lunch, and occasionally take a sip from the classroom water fountain during the rest of the day. I vividly remember coming back to class after recess or PE on a hot day, feeling like I was about to die of thirst and being allowed to drink from the water fountain only for as long as it took the also-thirsty student in line behind me to quickly count to ten and demand their turn to drink. That was it. "Tough luck, kid, that's your water ration for the afternoon." I remember some trying to continue drinking until the next student told on them or pushed them out of the way, or even going into the bathroom to be able to drink as much as they wanted from the sink tap!

Have you ever been thirsty like that? It's a pretty universal human experience, water bottle existence aside. Humans can survive without food for multiple weeks but without water only for a few days. Our bodies have a way of prioritizing their need of water more than anything else, which is why a dehydrated person will often lose interest in food. When we are dehydrated, our bodies tell us, "Your greatest need at this moment is water!"

Psalm 42:1-2 says, "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?" Do you allow yourself to feel your soul's thirst for God? Our souls were created for and, therefore, need God, just as our bodies were built for and, therefore, need water. When the face of God doesn't feel near, it makes sense that we long for it, thirst for it. And we should, because just like we need water (and even more so), we need God.

Questions for Reflection: Is it possible that you have tried to quench your thirst for God by pursuing other things in life (success, wealth, respect, approval etc.)? How do you think it would feel if your thirst for God was quenched?

Prayer: *God, I need you more than I need anything else. Help me to feel my deep need of you and to trust that you meet my need by giving yourself to me. Please help our church to become more of a place where people encounter, desire, worship, and adore you. Amen.*

Day 9

Monday, September 18

Resurrection

I saw a picture a couple weeks ago of wildflowers blooming in the aftermath of a forest fire. It was beautiful. You probably know that the current best practice in forest management is not to avoid fires at all costs. Doing that for years actually led to massive destruction. Forest fires help aid the natural cycle of plant growth, clear out debris, and make room for new plants. This feels like a metaphor for life sometimes, doesn't it? I imagine we all have experienced, to some extent, that the tighter we hold onto things, the faster they slip away.

If you have been around First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford for a while, you have probably heard me say that if I encountered compelling evidence that the historical Jesus of Nazareth was not crucified and then literally raised from the dead, I would quit my job and my faith. Christianity hinges on a belief in resurrection. The greatest tragedy in Jesus' life, his execution on false charges, also became his greatest triumph. Christianity is a religion of paradoxes, after all. Remember these? "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Jesus' death and resurrection not only invite us into eternal life, they also set up one of the greatest paradoxes of our faith: in order to thrive, we must let go. We must let go of the things that we have always known, the things that make us feel secure, the things we most desire. When we do so, we can be surprised by what comes next. After death comes resurrection.

Like wildflowers blooming after a forest fire, like Jesus' death opening the door to eternal life, something beautiful comes out of our acceptance of change, our letting go of what we are used to or what we think we need.

Questions for Reflection: What's one thing you are holding onto in your heart that, if you simply let go of it, you know would help your faith to grow? How can our church learn to let go of some things in order to embrace a new future?

Prayer: *God, help us to let go of all the habits, desires, and relationships that are stifling our growth. As a church, help us to let go of any traditions, programs, or ministries that are no longer honoring you, serving our community, and growing our faith. Amen.*

Day 10

Tuesday, September 19

Whose Voice?

Recently, I was playing wiffle ball with my kids and their cousins. Some of them didn't know the rules of the game; so I explained the rules to them. Even still, some of them didn't feel confident that they would remember the rules. So, I said to them, "That's ok. Just listen to my voice the whole time, and I'll explain what you need to be doing as we play." That's exactly what they did. I told them which bases to run to and who to throw the ball to and what to do with the ball when they had it. It ended up being a great time.

As an American church in the twenty-first century, it sometimes feels like we don't know the rules of the game we're playing. Why do less people care about the church today than in previous decades? What do we have to do to be a healthy church? There are many voices that would presume to tell us the answers. However, I think Jesus teaches us that two voices matter most. 1) When the disciples were fearing for their lives as their boat was tossed around on the stormy waters of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus called out, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid!" (Matt. 14:26-27). It was only by paying close attention to Jesus that Peter, as he stepped out of the boat onto the waters of the sea, was able to stay afloat and walk toward Jesus. So it is with us. We must pay close attention to Jesus and his words. Now is the time to open up the scriptures, talk to Jesus, and ask for his directions. 2) The ministry of Jesus was motivated by the crowds and, out of compassion, wanting to help them. We're told that he perceived them as sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). He saw their need and sought to shepherd them. So it is with us. We must pay attention to the voices of our unchurched neighbors so that we can best understand how to introduce them to Jesus the Shepherd. Where are they struggling? How are they hurting? How is it that Jesus can rescue and heal them?

Questions for Reflection: How can I better listen to the voice of Jesus in my life? How can I understand the needs of my neighbors better?

Prayer: *Jesus, please speak to us today. We long to hear your voice and know the plans you have for us. Help us, as individuals and as a church, to listen to our neighbors so that I may reach them with your love and grace. Amen.*

Day 11

Wednesday, September 20

The Unchurched

If you ask pretty much any American pastor, they will tell you that the vast majority of people who join their congregation are coming from another Christian church. Now, joining a new church is not a bad thing to do. People change churches for all kinds of reasons that are perfectly good. But the fact that almost all the “new” people in most churches, are, in reality, people who were previously part of a different Christian church – that’s not good.

One of the most serious and specific commands given by Jesus is this: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). Did you know that baptism is one of only two sacraments in the Presbyterian church? That’s because this verse is one of only two places in the entire Bible that Jesus tells his followers to continue doing something specific and exactly how to do it. In fact, it’s so important that we are even required to use the specific wording, called the Trinitarian formula, that is laid out in this passage. It’s one of the few things that Presbyterians are this particular about. Yet for something this important, it’s not something we do very often. You have probably noticed that most of the baptisms we do are for babies born to Christian parents. And those baptisms are great! We should and do celebrate every child born into the family of God and who receives the sacrament of baptism. What a gift for these children to grow up knowing they are a beloved child of God! But this shouldn’t constitute the majority of our baptisms, should it? That’s not really all that “going and making disciples” means, is it? Did you know that before 1953, there were regularly more adult baptisms than infant baptisms in the Presbyterian Church? Do we no longer have anything to offer to people who aren’t already part of our ranks?

Sometimes we act like that’s the case. Sometimes we act like anyone who would ever be interested in Jesus has had every opportunity to learn more about Christianity and would have already become Christian if they wanted to. But it might surprise you that this is simply not the case. It surprised me, as the truth of it gradually became apparent to me. I have had conversations with unchurched people who were curious about Christian faith but struggled to find a church that would study the Bible with them. I have had conversations with people who are curious about Christianity but find that Christians are really uncomfortable discussing it. I have had conversations with people who have come into a church and found it confusing, noting that everyone seems to expect that they already know what is going on, and felt alienated. And I have had many conversations with unchurched people who genuinely have no idea what the major teachings of Christianity are or what the faith we hold means in our lives. Yet we continue to carry ourselves with the assumption that everyone who is interested already knows what we have to offer.

Questions for Reflection: What would it mean if we carried the assumption that the people around us don’t know what Christianity is all about, and that they may be interested? What would it mean if we didn’t assume that a new person in our building already knows what the Gospel teaches us?

Prayer: *God, give your church the insight to see the obstacles keeping people from encountering your love and the willingness to remove those obstacles. Amen.*

Day 12

Thursday, September 21

Testify

Psalm 107:2 begins by declaring: “Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story.” The psalmist is referring to a “God story” – a story recounting some specific moment when God acted on a person’s behalf. How often do we tell each other our story – what God has done for us, what God is doing for us, where God is meeting us? Not often enough. Somehow it feels overly personal, potentially invasive, and offensive to our ingrained individualistic mindset when it comes to faith. And yet.... the Bible is full of people telling their stories of God meeting them, saving them, holding them. Church history is full of people telling their stories of God meeting them, saving them, holding them. This is how our faith works. We are supposed to tell our stories – stories of our faith leading us to question mindsets we have always held, stories of God leading us to love those we formerly felt contempt for, stories of God bringing us comfort in our hardest times, stories of God calling us out of darkness into the light. And when we tell those stories, more stories are written, because we encourage and teach each other. The end result brings us to a deeper and fuller knowledge of the concept that the psalmist also speaks of: giving thanks to the Lord, who is good and whose love endures forever (Psalm 107:1).

An amazing thing happens when we tell a God story to each other. Not only are we encouraged in our own faith by bearing witness to God’s activity in our lives, but other people are also encouraged in their own faith. Someone who is struggling to trust God with some decision they are facing will be encouraged to hear another member of the church talk about a similar struggle they had that God helped them to persevere through. Someone who is skeptical about religious institutions because they seem filled with insincere adherents may come to have faith in Christ because they hear someone talk about a God story and realize, “Wow! They are true believers!”

Jesus commands us to use words to share our faith through evangelism (Matt. 28:19-20). How can we expect ourselves to share our faith with those outside the church if we can’t even do that with those inside the church? Telling a God story to one another encourages the church and equips us for evangelism.

Questions for Reflection: What has God said to you or done for you recently? Have you told anyone about it?

Prayer: *God, thank you for all that you are doing in our lives. Help us to see you at work more clearly, and please give us the words to share it with others to encourage them in their faith. Amen.*

Day 13

Friday, September 22

Evangelism

Have you ever considered yourself to be “evangelical” about a certain topic? I have. Maybe you discovered a new hobby or interest that you can’t stop talking about, an author you think everyone should read, or a vacation destination that just makes you light up to tell others about. When we love something, we have a certain demeanor when we talk about it. We are enthusiastic, even effervescent. Even if we know the person we are talking to doesn’t necessarily share our interest, we hope to engage them on some level in discussing our interest. We tell them about how much we enjoy that thing, how it is making our life better, and, really, how it is part of who we are, a part that we are happy to share.

When we think of evangelism, it can become a little bit nerve-wracking. Overly pushy, manipulative, or culturally insensitive preachers have given evangelism a bad name. We don’t want to disrespect others’ beliefs, make them feel uncomfortable, or call attention to our differences, after all. But do we fear that when sharing about our favorite beach, our new workout routine, that trick we discovered in Microsoft Excel, or the concert we went to last weekend? Probably not. We are, after all, quite good about talking about things we love and identify with in ways that are open and enthusiastic but still respectful of others. Those skills are the same ones that apply to sharing our faith with those who don’t share it. Sometimes, when I fear that I could be imposing on someone by sharing about my faith, I stop to ask myself whether I would feel that way if I was sharing about something else.

Questions for Reflection: Does your faith in Christ give you faith, peace, joy, and a sense of purpose? Would it be so bad to tell someone about that?

Prayer: *God, give us the courage and the peace to share our faith with others with respect, love, and authenticity. Help us to understand that you want to use us to help others know your love. Amen.*

Day 14

Saturday, September 23

Truth

In a pivotal moment during Jesus' trial before his crucifixion, Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, asked Jesus, "What is truth?" How would you answer that question? Most of us tend to think of "truth" as meaning something like "in accordance with reality or the facts." When someone swears in a court of law to "tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth," they mean they will recount their memory of an event in accordance of what really happened. We expect them to be honest with their testimony. When we completed a "true or false" test in school, we were given a statement and asked whether the statement was true or false. "Sharks are mammals." True or false? (False.) "Herbivores eat only plants." True or false? (True.) This kind of truth is called propositional truth – a statement can be either true or false.

Propositional truth can be taught through education. As Presbyterians we have historically been very good at education. However, we often treat Christianity as if the only truth it presents to us is propositional. To some extent, the Christian concept of truth is propositional. "Jesus of Nazareth literally and physically rose from the dead." True or false? This is true. Nevertheless, when we look at what Jesus actually taught, he was rarely delivering propositional truth. Just consider the parables he told. Were they true or false? Did they literally happen or not? His parables were not "based on true stories." He was making them up in order to teach people. Teach them what? A list of facts to memorize? Propositional statements about God's will? No. He was trying to teach people in order to invite them into an experience with God. He was trying to encourage people to trust God, because God is good and forgiving and unconditionally loving. This is what we call experiential truth. It's one thing for me to say to my kids, "It's true that when you jump into the pool your dad will catch you." It's an entirely different thing to say to my kids when they're standing on the edge of the pool and I'm in the water, "It's ok, sweetie! Jump into my arms, and I'll catch you!" and then for them to jump into my arms and learn through experience that I will catch them. This is experiential truth. I believe we are able to follow Jesus more faithfully when we have someone who will walk beside us and lead us into experiential truth. Some people call this "discipleship."

Education tends to transmit propositional truth. Discipleship strives to transmit experiential truth. I don't know about you, but I would rather trust God in my everyday life than simply know certain facts about God that may or may not help me live out my faith.

Questions for Reflection: When is a time you felt you had to personally trust God for something? What helped you to find the strength to do it?

Prayer: *God, as a church, may we embolden one another to take the leap of faith. Help us not to get bogged down by the minutiae of theological doctrines but to simply trust in you. Amen.*

Day 15

Sunday, September 24

Belief

Today and tomorrow, I want to talk to you about belief and faith. Sometimes we use these words almost interchangeably, and, indeed, even the Bible demonstrates that there is an overlap in their meaning. For our purposes, I am going to draw a distinction that I believe is always true in concept.

Belief is intellectual assent. I believe in Antarctica. In fact, I believe in Antarctica with a high degree of certainty. I don't have any experiential knowledge of Antarctica – I've never been there, never particularly thought a lot about it or studied samples from there. I believe in it because I have seen satellite images of the earth, because it's drawn on every contemporary world map I have ever seen, because I was taught about it as a young child, and because I have seen species of penguins in aquariums that I am told live there. It seems like experts believe in Antarctica, and I have no reason to think they are in on some big conspiracy to trick people into believing in Antarctica. But it wouldn't particularly impact my life if I found out that Antarctica does not, in fact, exist. There is little in my day-to-day life that hinges on my belief in Antarctica. I guess I might buy a new globe for my children and retroactively lose a little respect for my second-grade teacher who made me memorize the seven continents, but that's about it. I wouldn't live differently or have other aspects of my worldview shaken if Antarctica didn't exist.

I also believe in God. I intellectually assent to the idea that there is a creator of the universe who is good and all-powerful. I intellectually assent to the idea that that God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, who lived and ministered on the earth, then was killed, resurrected, and ascended to heaven. But unlike my belief in Antarctica, my belief in God does impact my life. My sense of personal purpose and my understanding of my greatest needs and the hope of my salvation is based in belief in God. If God (and, in particular, God-in-Christ) isn't real, my whole worldview falls apart. That's why in Christianity, true belief must always lead us to respond to God in some way. In other words, true belief must lead to faith. Tomorrow we will reflect more about what happens when we move beyond belief and into faith. For today, consider these questions:

Questions for Reflection: What do you believe about Jesus? Based on what you believe, how ought you to respond to Jesus?

Prayer: *God, thank you for what the scriptures teach us about you and your activity in the world. Give us the courage to believe that the Gospel is true and that believing it is part of a larger purpose you have for us. Amen.*

Day 16

Monday, September 25

Faith

Yesterday we began reflecting on the distinction between belief and faith. Faith goes beyond belief to include an element of enacted trust. I believe in gravity, because I learned about it in school, and because it makes sense of what I observe of the world. But it goes beyond that, doesn't it? I have faith in gravity, every moment that I don't worry about lifting off the chair I'm sitting on and floating away. I have faith in gravity when I set a heavy object down and don't even consider the possibility that it will snap back up and hit me in the face. I have faith in gravity when I don't worry that the ground under my feet will dis-assemble into disparate bits of matter moving aimlessly through space. I have faith in gravity in a way that shows enacted trust. The way I move around the world displays my confidence that gravity is real.

Faith is belief enacted. We have faith in something when our confidence in it informs how we move through the world in ways that we aren't even always conscious of. We have faith in something when we know it to be true deep in the core of our being, or when we step out in the hope that the thing we believe to be true will prove to be trustworthy over time.

A more personal example of this is marriage. Any of us who have gotten married have exhibited an act of faith. We can't just intellectually know that the person we are marrying will continue to fit well with us as the years go by, that they will always love us and choose to see the best in us, that they will work with us as a teammate and prioritize our needs as well as their own, that our values will remain compatible. We are having faith. Having faith that the person we know and who knows us is, in fact, who we have experienced them to be in the course of our relationship. Having faith such that we pledge to share our lives with that person. Faith is much more like the type of confidence a young bride or groom has in their beloved than it is like the type of confidence I have that Antarctica exists, as I wrote about yesterday. I believe in Antarctica. I have faith in my wife. And in gravity.

Our belief in God ought to lead to faith in God. God is good and faithful and true. We are meant to structure our whole lives around the goodness and faithfulness and truth of God. We should follow wherever God leads us and obey whatever God tells us, trusting in God's character. Faith is the ultimate goal of our belief.

Questions for Reflection: Do you ever feel incapable, afraid, or embarrassed to do what God asks of you? What do you think would happen if you did what God asked despite your reservations?

Prayer: *God, turn our belief into faith. Help us to know you more, so that, in knowing you, we become more assured of your goodness and love, which is the reason we can trust you. Amen.*

Day 17

Tuesday, September 26

Sabbath

If you are in the workforce, raising a family, or are trying to have a social life, the chances are pretty high that you feel too busy, overworked, overcommitted, and overwhelmed. The pace of life right now is lightning fast. The margins in life are pencil thin. Many of us would give anything to escape the pressure. Instead, many of us end up paying a high price because of the pressure: our mental health. This is one of the reasons God gave us Sabbath.

You might remember when Rabbi Peter Stein and I led a joint scripture study in April on the topic of “Sabbath.” Rabbi Stein described the Sabbath as an island or a refuge – a place to which we can escape to push pause on our lives and take account of what is actually important. Sabbath is a gift that God offers to us. We often think that Sabbath means “going to church,” but it is so much more than that.

Let’s see if you can relate to this situation: You wake up with a sense of urgency. You and all the people in your house have to be out the door in an hour. Everyone’s rushing around to get themselves ready. You get to your destinations, and you’re faced with projects, assignments, or deadlines. You rush to get it all done, but you don’t. After school or work, you’re hurrying to get to sports practice or a meeting or just to get dinner on the table. Finally, at home in the evening, you’re trying to finish the work you didn’t get done earlier in the day, and suddenly it’s time for bed. You’re tired. You watch a little TV to unwind and stay up later than you meant to. You get into bed and collapse from exhaustion. You know, that when you wake up in the morning, you’re going to have to do it all again.

If we never pause our lives to simply notice the people and world around us, we are destined to get lost in the fever of life. Sabbath is meant to be a blessed opportunity for us to slow down, take account of our lives, give thanks to God, and notice what’s important. The reason we practice Sabbath as a community of faith is because if only one or a few of us slow down, they’ll get left behind by the rest who are moving full speed ahead. The true beauty of Sabbath is that once we slow down to take account of our lives, we often realize that not everything consuming our time is even worth our time. While it may seem scary to let go of some of these things, the other gift of Sabbath is the realization that God will accompany us on the journey and provide for our needs.

Questions for Reflection: What are some things consuming your time that don’t need to be there? What are some things consuming our time as a church that aren’t helping us to become more like Jesus?

Prayer: *God, we thank you for the gift of Sabbath. Forgive us, as a church, for succumbing to the temptation to consume the precious resources with which you’ve entrusted us – in particular, our time – in the name of institutionalism. Help us to give each other the gift of rest and, in the process, learn to trust you more and more. Amen.*

Day 18

Wednesday, September 27

Relational

If I asked you to imagine religious people calling each other brothers and sisters, what would you think of? Perhaps what comes to mind is a Roman Catholic religious order, with separate groups of men or women who have vowed to spend their lives living, working, and praying together in community. Perhaps you imagine something more like a cult in which everyone lives together and calls one another Brother and Sister and lives in harmony, at least until it inevitably implodes. Or maybe you think of literal brothers and sisters of religious traditions that encourage large families and of children growing up with ten to fifteen siblings, all with very defined roles and expectations within the household.

Or perhaps you know that early Christians had a peculiar habit of referring to one another as siblings. Here is an accusation from the Roman critic of Christianity Caecilius, as reported by Mark Felix in a book written in the second century AD: “[Christianity] should be rooted out and destroyed! You know one another by secret marks and insignia. You love one another almost before you know one another... You promiscuously call one another brothers and sisters. You apparently do this so that your debaucheries will take on a flavor of incest.”

The habit of considering one another as siblings did not endear the Early Church to the culture around it. Christians did not maintain a proper distance between men and women, between people of different social classes. They regarded one another as brothers and sisters in a way that was shocking and disconcerting to observers, that even raised suspicion of the entire project of Christianity being based on sexual deviance. But this practice was so important to followers of Christ that they continued it despite these accusations. Regarding God as their Father and Christ as their elder brother, and often rejected by their blood families, Christians treated each other with the closeness and love of siblings, even when that was regarded as wildly inappropriate by their culture.

I think the future of the church depends on our ability to nurture and encourage these kinds of relationships in the church today. After all, Jesus was talking about the relationships his disciples had among themselves when he said, “Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

Questions for Reflection: Do the members of the church feel like siblings to you or more like acquaintances? How far are you willing to go to demonstrate your love and commitment to other people in the church?

Prayer: *God, create in our church a strong sense of family and belonging. May we come to prioritize our relationships with each other and come to love each other more, so that, ultimately, we may know your love better. Amen.*

Day 19

Thursday, September 28

Mission

When you think of mission, what do you think of? If I had to guess, I might say you are thinking of traveling somewhere to serve people who are more economically disadvantaged than you are. You may think of something like our church's trips to Kenya and Jamaica. And those things are, in fact, examples of one type of mission. Jesus does call us to go and "teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 28.19). And we are called to care for those who are in need: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, invite in the stranger, visit the imprisoned. What we miss, though, when this is our primary view of mission, is that it ought not to be isolated from the rest of our lives. Mission isn't a place we go, it is a way we live.

The mindset of caring for the hungry, the sick, and the lonely should permeate our entire lives. The mindset of bringing God's love to the world should include not just distant lands, but the people we see every day. If your faith is not informing how you respond to an annoying coworker, a frustrating family member, or a stranger in need, you may need to reevaluate how you think of mission in your own life.

And mission isn't just an individual pursuit. It is also something that we carry out as a church together. In addition to having a mission mindset as we move through our own lives, we must have a strategic mission mindset as a church body. The question we ask ourselves shouldn't be "What can the church do for us?" or even, "What can we do for the church?", but, "What can we, the church, do for our community?" How can we take the love God shows us and give it to those around us?

Question for Reflection: What mission are we uniquely positioned to carry out, every day, right here where we are?

Prayer: *God, you are a sending God. You sent yourself in the person of Jesus Christ to live among us, to serve us, and, in doing so, to teach us about you. May we too also see ourselves as sent into the world – to live among our neighbors, to serve them, and, in doing so, teach them about you. Amen.*

Day 20

Friday, September 29

Filtering the Noise

I am so grateful to have walked this 20-day journey with you. Now comes the next part of the journey. Tomorrow is the first day of the first Faith Forward Vision Team retreat. Please, continue to keep the Vision Team in your prayers throughout the Faith Forward process. At tomorrow's retreat, they will begin discerning and updating our church's mission, vision, and values on the way to helping us craft a "roadmap" outlining the path for us to live into our mission, vision, and values. In particular, please be in prayer that the Team will be able to wade through all the weeds to find the path.

Have you ever been in a loud environment, while trying to have a conversation? At a café or pub, you may have been trying to talk to someone while live music played loudly. Or, perhaps, on a busy city street, you may be trying to discuss your plans for lunch with someone while the loud sounds of car and foot traffic buzzed around you. It can require intentional concentration and a heightened use of your other senses to simply hear the other person. It is similar for leaders like the Vision Team.

Tomorrow, there will be lots of noise for them to filter out. There are the demands of personal life that might take them "out of the room" in their minds. There are personal preferences that individual Team members may have about how they want the church to be. There are the cultural narratives about religious institutions that may lead Team members to make unhelpful assumptions about what the church is and ought to be doing. This is all noise. The only sound that matters is the voice of God's leading. Please pray that the Vision Team is able to filter out all the noise to hear the voice of God.

The retreat this weekend is the first of a series of retreats that will take place. Along the way, there will be opportunities for you to hear about their progress and to provide feedback for their consideration. But for now, let's end our 20-Day journey the way that we began it – by praying for our Vision Team.

The names of members of the Vision Team are listed in the front of this devotional. I encourage you to use the following prayer and lift up all the Vision Team members:

Prayer: *Gracious God, I thank you that [Names of all the Vision Team Member] are leaders of this church. Please help them to know your voice and to become more like Jesus. May their leadership during Faith Forward help our church to become more vital and faithful, and may people in Greater Rochester and beyond know you and your love because of us. Amen.*



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