

If you were to get a call from a neighbor or from a friend or from a family member today, and they told you they were thinking of committing suicide, what would you tell them? Could you give them any reason to live for tomorrow? Could you give them any reason to hope? That question was asked by one of the speakers at a workshop, I was in this week.

Why are we here? What's the point? We gather this morning to worship God. But what difference does it make . . . what difference will it make when you leave this room? What difference will it make on Monday to Saturday of this week? What difference does it make in your conversations with your friends, your neighbors your co-workers.?

Does our being here give us a reason to hope? Are we here this morning in worship because our lives have been transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ? Has the way in which Jesus changed our lives that gives us a word of hope for others?

I had one message just about finished for this morning. In that message I was going to look with you at the first eight verses of Acts 1. During the coming weeks, I am planning to look at the story of the early Christian church as found in the book of Acts. This message replaces that one. It connects in a number of places, but I felt God was asking me to give this one instead.

First, let me tell you just a bit of my own walk with Jesus during these last fifty-three years. Some of you have heard parts of this before. Will I squeeze it all into twenty minutes? I am sure I cannot. I do want to try to give some of the highlights, just a few of the key decisive moments. If we run out of time and you need to go, you have my permission to leave at any time.

Yes, I was blessed to have two parents who were both committed Christians. Yes, they verbally taught us about Jesus and about following Jesus. But just as important as anything they ever said was the way they lived their lives day after day. That was a gift and I am grateful for it.

When I was seven, Hartman Rice came to my home church at Raven Run. Part way through the week, when Brother Hartman gave the invitation to accept Jesus, I decided that I needed to respond. I was sitting with my grandparents that night. As I pushed passed my grandmother, I remember her asking, "Do you're parents know what you are doing?" No, they didn't, but they didn't object. Soon after, at the tender age of seven, on a chilly Sunday afternoon I was baptized in the Raystown branch of the Juniata River, just a mile or so from my home.

But it wasn't long before I began to wonder if I really did know what I had done. Especially as I came into my teen years, I developed something of a split personality. That was easy to do since I attended school in one district and the church my dad began to pastor and all my friends in my youth group were in another school district. So I was one person in school, freely using profanity, telling dirty stories, and questionable jokes, and someone completely different at church and with my youth group some fifteen miles away.

I knew it wasn't right. I began to feel the need to start over. I felt I needed to make a new profession of faith, but I had all the excuses; I was already a member of the church . . . my dad was the minister . . . what would people think? I remember a number of times, standing through

the closing hymn, listening to the invitation, holding onto the back of the pew and refusing to respond.

For a number of years, I was a regular attendee at church camp. When I was sixteen, I went to camp again. I don't remember the name of the speaker, but he was the protestant chaplain at the Cook County Prison in Chicago, IL. As I listened to him speak, I realized that I was not following Jesus – but I wanted to. So one morning, in my prayer time, I again asked Jesus to be the Lord of my life. I went home and asked to be rebaptized, and on a Sunday afternoon in early August I was again baptized this time in a creek that flowed through a pasture not far from the church.

There were other key moments along the way, moments like experiencing an infilling of the Holy Spirit at the Pittsburgh COB not long before I started college in the summer of 1968. Another powerful experience of the Holy Spirit's presence occurred during my senior year of college at EMC. Then I went to Africa for three years with the Mennonite Central Committee to serve in Botswana. I know I've told this story before, but it fits and so I'm going to tell it again. I finished college a semester early in February of 1972. I wanted to serve as a volunteer overseas. I began the discussions with MCC. I was a college graduate (or soon would be). I had construction experience. You'll be easy to place. March, April, May, early June. We have a place for you in Malawi.

I went for my two weeks of orientation. But by the time I arrived at orientation that assignment had fallen through. Back to Pittsburgh to work and wait. July, August, September, October. At the time I was meeting with a Bible study group. In early October, I came to the realization that maybe, just maybe I was asking God to bless the plans that I had already made without really asking what God wanted. I knew I needed to surrender that to God and I did. And God gave me permission to go to Botswana.

I came back from Botswana and began additional studies at the Mennonite Seminary in Elkhart, IN. While there I did a summer pastorate in Ivester, IA. Near the end of that summer that I specifically sensed God's call that led me into pastoral ministry. Kathy and I have now been together in ministry for almost 25 years.

In 1995 I attended my first Promise Keepers event in Washington, D.C. The first speaker of the evening was Louis Palau. He preached a simple gospel message and invited us to surrender our lives to Jesus. Many responded. I sat in my seat and prayed. I knew the temptations that I struggled with. I knew what I needed to surrender or I thought I did.

That night I heard something different. That night I heard God say, “Your real problems are not what you think they are. Your real temptation is your anger at your wife. Huh? I hadn't thought about that. But I did think about it. I knew it was true. I confessed that to God. I went home and confessed it to Kathy. That experience that weekend helped me to fall in love with Kathy . . . and with God all over again.

I had a similar experience again at conference in this past week. We had powerful times of prayer, inspiring speakers, and a workshop with Jeff Patton that again opened my eyes to the presence of God in a new and exciting way. Jeff pointing out some of the signs, some of the evidence that the way we have done church for the last one hundred years is simply not working. The results is

thousands of dying churches all over the country. Jeff has spent about twenty years pastoring in the United Methodist Church. His numbers and his observations were from that setting. Much of what he said is also applicable to the COB.

Did you know that the United Methodist Church is now closing 3500 churches per year? Did you know that the average age of a member of the United Methodist Church is 68? Churches in which members expect their pastor to take care of them, churches in which members believe that the primary task of the pastor is to keep the members happy . . . those are dying churches. Do you know that? Do you believe it?

On the other hand, churches that look to their pastors as the equippers, the trainers, those are the churches that are growing and thriving. Churches that dare to focus on Jesus as the center of their faith, churches that are willing to step out in faith to claim the promises of God . . . those are the churches that God is blessing.

What does that mean for me? I am now 53. That gives me about 10 – 15 years left of being an active pastor. What am I going to do with these active years? There's a whole lot that I don't know. Does God want me to finish my time in active ministry here at Conestoga? I don't know. What kind of a church is Conestoga going to be in 10 – 15 years from now? I don't know. Will Conestoga be here as a church in 15 years? I would like to think so. I am glad for the signs of new life that I see. I don't know what the future holds.

But I do know that I'm going to follow Jesus. I want these closing years of ministry to be about Jesus. As I read the book of Acts, as I read the N.T. . . . it's all about Jesus. It's about what he said. It's about what he did. It's about his life-changing . . . life-transforming power. That's what I want to be about as well.

In closing this morning, I do want to give an invitation. I would also invite each of us to think about where we are in the journey with Jesus. Have we started? If you have not yet yet made a profession of faith, I would invite you to do so this morning. We are planning to have baptism in several weeks. Haven't set the date yet, but if you have not yet made a public profession of faith, I would ask you, "Is it time? Is it time to step over the line? Is it time to say, "Yes."

Perhaps you made that commitment years ago. We are all in different places? Some of us still have small children at home. What does it mean to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ raising a family. We teach our children about Jesus in what we say and in what we do. We also teach in the ways we live our lives, in how we spend our money, in how we reach out to help the hungry and the poor and the hurting. Perhaps your prayer this morning needs to be, God help me to be the father, to be the mother that will point my children to you.

Children are older, you've discover some of that extra time that you once thought you would never have again. What are you going to do with those hours? What is God asking you to do with those hours. Is it time to learn a new hobby? Is it time to find new ways to be in ministry and service to others.

For some, the surrender needs to be the pocketbook. The older I get, the more I believe, the issue is never about money. God has blessed us generously. God has blessed us abundantly. The issue is

never about money, the real issue is about trust. Do we really trust God to provide for our needs. Many of us struggle with greed and with selfishness. Is God asking us to let go and to trust him with our financial resources?

I heard one speaker this week tell of challenging his parishoners by asking them to commit to moving toward the tith. "If you haven't started to give . . . this month give one percent, next month give two percent, next month give three percent. Keep increasing your giving by one percent every month. If you ever reach the point at which you can't pay your bills because you are giving to God, you come to me and I'll pay you're bills for you." Do you believe that you can't out give God? I do.

Perhaps you have retired. What does it mean to follow Jesus in retirement? You do know that the word *retirement* is not in the Bible. What does it mean to follow Jesus after your active days of employment are over? There's one great thing about retirement – you can't get fired for talking about Jesus. What might God still be calling you to do, to be a faithful disciples in these years of your life. Perhaps you've got the time and the financial resources to have that RV or the cabin at the shore or the mountains. That's O.K. But how does God still want you to be involved in ministry and mission and service?

Perhaps you are in your twilight years and you know it. You don't have the strength and the energy to be involved in kingdom work in ways you once did. Are you willing to commit to praying for the church, for the pastors, for the work of the church? Are you willing to smile and share with others the love of Jesus? God never asks us to give what we don't have. He asks us to give what he has given us.

I know that some of what I said this morning just might be offensive to some people. That's O.K. Again, it's not my job to keep everyone happy. Jesus didn't. I don't expect to. I do plan to live my life sold out to Jesus walking with him in radical obedience. I invite you to do the same.

In closing this morning, I invite you to think about where you are in your journey with Jesus and where God is calling you to go. This morning Kathy and I will not be greeting people at the door. We will be staying here near the front of the sanctuary. If there is anyone who would like to talk further about what you heard God saying to you, or if you would like one of us to pray with you, we will be available.

Let's pray . . .

Alan Miller
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