

“FIGHTING FOR YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE”

Sermon by Rev. Ron Farr

Based on Matthew 4:18-25

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When I was quite little, I remember my mother putting me to bed and reading me the children’s book “**Curious George Rides a Bike.**” Curious George was a little monkey from the jungle brought to the city by the man in the yellow hat and was curious about everything.

In the book, curious George learns to ride a bike which opens a whole new world to him. The little monkey on his bike spots the paper boy. George is curious and asks if he can help. Pretty soon George is the one delivering papers and is heading further and further out of town. There he spots a stream and becomes curious about that. He decides it would be fun to make paper boats out of the newspapers and watch them drift on the current. He becomes curious where they are going. He follows them downstream until he spots a circus... and on and on and on. As a kid I liked how George’s curiosity got him into all kinds of exciting adventures. In fact, all of life seemed to me like an exciting adventure that I was preparing to go on.

This morning we heard a story about a few men who, like curious George, were quite curious, curious about a certain man named Jesus, curious about an adventure he was inviting them to take with him when he said, “*Come follow me, and I will make you fish for people.*”

They wanted to know who he was, and what he meant when he said, “*I will make you fish for people.*” They wanted to know if he was the Messiah. They wanted to know what they could learn and how they might change and what would happen to them if they followed him and walked with him in life.

They were so curious, so full of questions. They probably didn’t even know how to explain to their friends and family why they felt like dropping their nets and going on an adventure with this Jesus. Maybe they sensed that if they followed Jesus for awhile that exciting new things would happen, that he would open their eyes to new realities, that their lives would change a lot in interesting ways.

You came to church this morning looking for something too. You dropped the nets of your weekly activities and came here for some reason. What are YOU looking for? What are you curious about? Can you put it into words? Maybe it is hard for you to say what it is exactly that you are looking for this morning. Maybe you are looking for peace or comfort, maybe you are looking for love, maybe you are looking for wisdom, maybe you are looking for forgiveness or healing, maybe you are looking for a spiritual awakening in which your eyes will be opened and you will see into what is eternal. Maybe you are just curious, like

curious George, like curious Peter and Andrew standing on the beach, and you want to know more about this Jesus, where he came from and where he is going and where he might take you.

We all start our spiritual journey this way. A little curiosity. The promise of an adventure. The hope of transcendent experience. The longing for something deeper and truer than our present circumstances are yielding. You have all started your spiritual journey. For many of you, you started your spiritual journey a long time ago and you have walked many miles, and you have searched in many places for God, for peace, for healing, for love, for grace. And this morning is just another chapter in your spiritual journey – what will you learn today? How will God bless you and awaken you today?

It is great that you all made it here today to pursue your next steps on your spiritual journey. Many did not make it. Many bumped into one too many obstacles. Many got distracted. Many have lost their way. Many have forgotten how important their spiritual life is to them. Many have lost touch with their curiosity.

Today's drama is about how easy it is to get derailed in our spiritual journey. Here is a woman who wants to go to church – to an evening church service. That's all. But the obstacles that confront her and block her seem unending. Babysitter, change of plans in the kid's schedule, car failure..... It really is not that easy to get to church. You must overcome many outer obstacles and even more inner obstacles to get yourself here. Just getting to church on a Sunday morning for worship or a Thursday night class is a major accomplishment, a major victory, for our spiritual journey. Just showing up is a good part of the battle. You have fight for your spiritual life, if you are going to have one.

I once shared with you a famous story from India that's worth repeating about a man who went to the ashram of a famous guru. After ceremoniously bowing to the guru to show his deepest respect, this seeker asked his most heartfelt question, "How can I find God?"

The guru smiled serenely. He asked that a tub of water be brought into the room. "Look down into the water very closely," the guru instructed solemnly. The seeker peered down into the tub unsuspecting when suddenly the guru leaped on top of the man like a cat and forced his face into the water. The man struggled to raise his head to take a breath but the guru held him down. Finally the guru released him, and the devotee came up sputtering and gasping for breath. The guru said to him, "*When you hunger for God as you just hungered for breath, then you will find God.*"

How much do you hunger for God? When Jesus asks us, "What are you looking for?" this is HIS way of helping us get focused and feel our hunger for God, just as that guru helped that seeker feel his hunger for God by holding his face under water. When Jesus asks us, "What are you looking for?" he is challenging us to look into ourselves and see what is motivating us, see what our spiritual life really means to us, see how much we really want to know God.

Jesus knows how distracted we often become. Sometimes we come to church almost out of habit. We sit passively in the pews, distracted by many things, and we forget why we've come, we forget what we are seeking. And when we forget, when we become passive, when we stop feeling our hunger for God, our spiritual life comes to a halt.

Jesus said, *"Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you."* How much are you seeking? How much are you knocking? Nobody else can do this for us, not our spouses, not our friends, not even our pastors. NOBODY can read the Bible **for** us, nobody can go to church or a Bible study group **for** us, nobody can do our praying **for** us, nobody can serve God **for** us. Each one of us must do this ourselves. Each one of us must bring our very best creativity, intelligence, and resolve to our search for God, to our efforts to be in harmony with God. If we are not clear about what we are seeking, then we do not seek. And if we do not seek, we will find nothing.

Now take a minute and think about the words of Jesus found in today's scriptures. Jesus says, *"What are you looking for?"* He says, *"Come and see."* He says, *"Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you."* Do you see what a simple and open ended invitation this is? Do you see how this journey of faith to which Jesus is calling you depends NOT on you holding just the right set of beliefs about Jesus or salvation? Do you see how you are NOT asked to be perfect or to prove that you are worthy of heaven? Do you see that you are NOT expected to have everything all worked out with no doubts and no confusion? Rather, you, just as you are, are simply asked to seek, to knock, to explore, to "come and see" and check things out, to hunger for deeper things, to grow a little more each day and learn as you go. Anybody with an open heart to Christ can do that.

Jesus does not give us simple answers or mindless formulas to follow. Rather, he keeps asking us questions, he keeps challenging us to open our hearts and grow some more. To a stressed out and irritable Martha, Jesus said, *"Only one thing is needed."* He never tells her or us what the one thing is that is needed. We must figure it out. On the question of paying taxes to Rome, Jesus said, *"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."* He wants us to figure out what it means to give to God what is God's.

When Jesus gives us his parable of the sower and the seed, Jesus's implied question to us is, *"What kind of soil are you when it comes to receiving the word of God? Are you rocky or shallow soil in which God's seed cannot establish itself, or are you fertile soil for God?"* We must work on the question and seek how to become fertile soil for God's ways. When Jesus says to Nicodemus and to us, *"You must be born again"*, he never explains exactly what this means. He wants us to work with this question and be changed as we open ourselves to its message. Jesus values your ability to seek and search and knock until the doors leading to understanding and love and the presence of God begin to open.

This past week Patty and I saw the movie **"Deep Impact."** In this movie all life on the planet is threatened with extinction when astronomers discover that a comet the size of

Texas is hurling directly towards the Earth and is heading for a direct impact. This kind of event is exactly what scientists now believe wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.

In the movie the United States along with Russia has worked out a daring space flight that would attempt to land a spacecraft on the comet, drill into its surface and plant several atom bombs there. Hope runs high throughout the movie that the detonation of these bombs will deflect the comet into an orbit that will miss the earth. However, that effort and every other effort to hurl missiles at the comet failed.

As the news sinks in, people begin to realize the magnitude of what is about happen. They, and all their loved ones, their children, their co-workers, their friends, all are about to lose their lives. All the cities along the Atlantic US coast were about to be wiped out by a towering tidal wave 1,000 feet high. All plant life and animal life on the planet's surface is expected to be extinguished within 6 weeks as an enormous dust cloud from the comet's impact rises and poisons the atmosphere for 2 years.

The emotional impact of this movie drives deep into your psyche as you watch people assessing what was really important to them. You see people hugging loved ones for the final time and telling them how much they love each other. You see parents sacrificing their lives attempting to save their children. You see an adult daughter making peace with her estranged father on the beach as they watch the colossal tidal wave coming in. And finally you witness brave astronauts uttering their last words over a TV screen to loved ones back on earth before they sacrifice their lives in a suicide collision into the comet in hopes of saving their planet. There is no chance of these people getting distracted from what is most important. It's just that they didn't have time to grow and be changed... But YOU do.

Take advantage of the time you have been given. Attend an adult Bible study group. Make prayer more a part of your life and pray more earnestly. Worship on Sunday mornings more faithfully. And when you worship, give to it your whole heart and mind and soul. Experiment during the week in your daily life encounters with being more loving or more forgiving.

What is the final result of all our spiritual seeking, of all our persistent knocking on God's doors, of all our efforts to follow the Lamb of God and serve our Creator? Where does this all lead?

There never will be a time of enlightenment when your journey ends and you have no more to learn. In the end, you still probably will have some doubts and some confusion, you still will be imperfect and full of raw edges, you still may have questions about some Christian doctrines. But one thing is for sure. We all will be changed if we engage in the process of faith.

You will grow into a heart and a mind that is so pliable from repeatedly being broken open as you continuously seek to know the new things God is teaching you that everything now can be loved. You will have a softer and more relaxed spirit that feels no more need to

judge or criticize or condemn others to make the world right. You will have faced your own imperfections and mediocrity so many times that you will finally allow yourself to receive God's forgiveness and be at peace.

You will have a "flowing spirit" that tenderly loves all human beings with their eccentricities, gifts, inconsistencies and dreams. You will have a "determined spirit" like Martin Luther King, Jr., who said, "It is not enough to talk about love. There is another side called justice. Justice is love correcting that which would work against love." Your seeking will take you into a deep sense that all will be reconciled to God in the end.

You will touch more and more the spirit of wonder with which God holds each one of you, the very same spirit of wonder which you have toward your own children while you watch them sleep at night. You will have a humble and excited sense that there is always more to learn, always more to experience, that your old ways are small and can be let go of like a leaf you have set adrift on a stream, that you can become new creations and that there is always a new creation just inside the old one. You will have a peaceful and fearless eternal spirit, a sense that beneath it all God holds us all benevolently - so whether we live or die, everything is in Christ, and everything is OK.

Remember what you are looking for. Feel your hunger for God. Forget about having the perfect faith, forget about trying to prove your worth. Just BE on your journey.

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