

“Expanding the Kingdom”

It is wonderful to be with you (here today) on this “Family First Sunday” and to be reminded of the importance of our connection with Christ. Today we’re in week nine of a sermon series in which we’ve been challenging ourselves with what the “Next Steps” might be in our faith walk with Jesus. It doesn’t matter where you’ve been, what you’re doing, (in this series), for all of us, there is always a next step.

New in the faith, it might be a first step or a small step. (We all start somewhere.) Somewhat into it, it might be a new insight that will cause you to consider something you’ve never thought to consider. Long in the faith, you’ve been coming to church for years, don’t ever think that you’ve finally arrived. We never finally arrive until (in heaven) we finally arrive. None of us do. There is always in this life, (for all of us) room to grow.

Today we’re going after a topic that is basic to our calling. It’s one that is foundational to what it means for us to be followers of Jesus. It has to do with sharing the faith. It has to do with passing on the faith. The sermon title today is “expanding the kingdom.”

Let’s start with a bit of clarification; actually, two clarifications. There are two places (I believe) where many people get confused or (off course) in their Christian life.

One is that they start with this idea (this definition in their head) that being a Christian means (more than anything) that there is a certain way you are to live, there are certain things (in life) you are called to do. Moral standards to follow, behaviors to maintain; if you’re a Christian, then there are certain things you do.

If you’re a Christian, you go to church. If you’re a Christian, you read your Bible. If you’re a Christian, you pray, you treat others with respect, volunteer to help out, and in (whatever ways you can) you do whatever you can to live like Jesus wants you to live. That’s what a Christian does. That’s what Christian people do.

Now, it’s hard to argue with that; there’s nothing wrong with that. (Don’t get the wrong idea.) As Christians, all of those things fit. After all, it’s the things we do (in our lives) that enable us to stand out (in the world). And our calling (on a basic level) is to stand out and to make a difference by being different. On the one hand, it all fits and it’s true.

On the other hand, (and this is where we need to be clear), our basic and fundamental calling is not to go somewhere or to do something, but to follow someone. First and foremost, our calling is to a daily and an ongoing relationship with Christ.

“Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fish for people.” “Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will teach you how to live.” Follow me,” Jesus said, “and I’ll help you (and show you) how to stand out.” But don’t miss the point. The following precedes the making. The relationship comes before the responsibility. We are not called to fish. We are called to follow. Only when we follow, are we enabled to fish.

That’s the first place where (I believe) many people get confused and fail to get on track. The second is (and these two are related), when Jesus calls us, (before anything else) he invites us to “Come and see.”

That was the invitation (in John’s gospel) to those first disciples. “Come and see” (who I am). “Come and see” (what I’m able to do). “Come and see” what I have to offer and how (in your life) I can help. When Jesus calls us, he invites us to “Come and see.”

But (in our calling) it doesn’t stop there. And, (again), this is where we need to be clear. He invites us to “Come and see.” And (from there) he commands us to “Go and tell.” There’s an invitation to explore and a command to expand.

“Come and see what I can do.” “Go and tell what you have found.” “Come and see the difference I can make in your life.” “Go and tell the difference he has made in your life.”

On each of these points, we need to be clear. Our basic calling is not to do something or to go somewhere, but to follow someone. It’s only in that relationship (with Jesus) that this ever works. And the invitation (he gives) is to come and see for ourselves what he has to offer. The command (we’ve been given) is to go and tell what we’ve found.

“As the Father has sent me (Jesus said), so I am sending you.” As a family of faith, that’s what we want to be. We want to be a church that doesn’t just come together (in this place) on Sunday mornings and grows, but a church that goes out (into the world) and gives.

Today we’re in Luke, chapter five. (If you want to turn there in your Bibles, you can follow along.) This is one of those stories that we find in two of the other gospels. Matthew and Mark, they each tell the story. It’s the story of a man with a significant need who is brought by his friends to Jesus.

Chapter five, (starting in verse 17), it says, “One day as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick.” (Verse 18), “Some men came carrying a paralytic on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this (it says) because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus.” Verse 20, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven.’”

Now, (stop there for a moment), obviously, Jesus knew this man couldn’t walk (he had this need), but (he also knew) that his greater need was for forgiveness. (It’s easy to forget that.) And so, the first thing he does is he forgives his sins, so that the promise of heaven (where he can walk forever) is his. That was this man’s greatest need, so Jesus forgives his sins.

When this happened (it says), “The Pharisees and teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, ‘Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” (In other words), “Only God can forgive sins. Who does this Jesus think he is?”

Verse 22, “Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, ‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts? Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk?’ But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins…” He said to the paralyzed man, ‘I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.’ (It says) Immediately he stood up in front of them, took what he had been lying on and went home praising God.” (And then it says), “Everyone was amazed and gave praise to God. They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today.’”

You think? A paralyzed man, brought to Jesus, lowered through the roof, sins forgiven, and he gets up and walks home. (They were right.) Those are some remarkable things.

And so, what do we make of this story and what would it look like for us if we were to do the same? This man who has a significant need is brought to Jesus by his friends. Mark tells us there were four friends, they bring him to Jesus. I want to highlight just a few things in this story and see what we can learn.

The first thing I want you to notice (in this story) is that they have compassion for someone who is hurting. They identify someone in their life with a need that only Jesus can meet and they do something about it.

Now, we’re talking (today) about expanding the kingdom. Sometimes, when we think about expanding the kingdom, our minds (immediately go) to the things we do at the church. We volunteer. We sing in the choir. I’m an usher, help with youth ministry, whatever it is. And it’s all important. All of those things count and they help. But this is more than that.

What this is, it’s developing a mission mindset (among ourselves) that wherever I go, whatever I do, the mission we share hasn’t changed. You go to school or to work or you’re hanging out with your friends; (in each of those settings) you’re going to do whatever you can to identify someone with a need, and when you see that need, you’re going to do everything you can to bring that person to Jesus, to bring Jesus to that person.

What would that look like (for us) if we all took that approach? What if we all adopted that mindset that I’m going to be on mission today? I’m going to identify someone who has a need and I’m going to do what I can to show them God’s love, to bring them to Jesus? What would that look like?

Now, the trouble (with that mindset) is that it might lead us to people who are in trouble. And (for many people) those are the people they want to avoid. I have enough trouble (of my own) already. I don’t need to take on someone else’s trouble.

I’d challenge you to do that. (That’s what those four friends did.) This man couldn’t help himself. He needed his friends. I’d challenge you to do that. (Jesus challenges us to do that.)

Think of a name (right now). Who is it you know who is going through a difficult time? Maybe it’s someone who has lost a loved one, or they’re going through a hard chapter in their marriage, or they’re having a challenge with a child, or they’ve been let go of from a job, or they’re having financial troubles, or there’s a

recent diagnosis, whatever it is. It doesn't matter what it is. We all know people who are having trouble, and when they're having trouble, that's when (often times) they're more open to hearing the message of Jesus.

What would that look like for us? What would that next step look like for you? It's more than just what we do here at church. It's what happens through us (as the church) when we go out into the world.

That's the first thing we need to notice. These men had compassion for a hurting friend. The second is that (in bringing their friend) they had faith that Jesus would make a difference. (This is a really cool part in the story.) I've read this story many times, but (this time) it stood out.

It says (in verse 20) "When Jesus saw their faith, he said, 'Friend, your sins are forgiven.'" Jesus saw their faith. Not just the man's faith, but their faith. It was their faith that made the difference.

In fact, in the story, we don't finally know how much faith this man really had. We don't. Maybe he had a strong faith. Maybe he had a weak faith. Maybe he wanted to have faith, but he'd been paralyzed for so long that it was hard. We don't know. What we know is that this man was healed, and he was healed (Jesus responded) because of their faith.

Now, we need to be careful here, because I think we all understand that I can't have faith for you, and you can't have faith for me. Our faith is personal. We can't have faith for our kids. We can't have faith for our friends. But the faith we have (in our lives) can have an impact in leading others (in their lives) to faith.

I love this part of the story because (in the story) it didn't all depend upon the man's faith. It was their faith. That changes the whole thing. That means that I can approach this other person (in my life) who doesn't have any faith, and still know that even if they don't have any faith, that God is working through my faith to bring about faith in them.

What would that look like for us, if we didn't worry about whether that other person was ready to hear about Jesus, or if the door wasn't quite open, or if the timing wasn't quite right? What if we just knew (and believed) that even if that person has no faith, that our faith (that your faith) might lead them to faith?

In the story, this man was paralyzed in his body. (He couldn't walk.) But there are many ways in which people become paralyzed in life. Things like guilt or shame or bitterness or hurt; they can all be paralyzing. Things like past mistakes and they start thinking, "What's the point?" and they have no faith.

In the story, Jesus responded to their faith. In life, Jesus responds to our faith. Don't worry about that other person's faith. Put your faith in Jesus, because Jesus can create faith (through you) in that other person.

There's one final thing we need to notice in this story and it's obvious, but I don't want us to miss it, and that is that (these men), they brought their friend to Jesus. They brought him to Jesus. They didn't just tell him about Jesus, they brought him to Jesus. They don't encourage him to check out Jesus, they literally carry him to Jesus.

This month (as you know) we're moving into the holiday season and (as we do every year) we're going to have a number of special opportunities to worship. We're going to advertise it and put it out there, and the word will get out and people will show up. But there's no better way (no more effective way) than when (actual people) bring (actual people) to Jesus. We can invite them and let them know it's happening, but when you pray for them and talk with them and actually bring them, that's when it happens. They brought their friend to Jesus. Jesus calls us to bring our friends to him.

It's interesting, in the gospels, how the kingdom of God expands. It doesn't expand hundreds or thousands (of people) at a time. (There are a few exceptions, early in the book of Acts.) But, more often than not, it grows one person at a time, one changed life at a time.

Now, sometimes (we might think) it's only just one person, it's only just one missed opportunity. (Don't miss it.) That's how the kingdom grows. That's how the kingdom expands. It expands when one person at a time (who has come to believe in Jesus) talks with one person at a time who hasn't yet come to believe.

And sometimes, (I'll admit it), it's not easy. Sometimes (we all know it), it seems like a dead end. Sometimes it might even feel like (it's never going to happen), and it might not happen, until we tear the roof off and get past all of the reasons why (it shouldn't happen), why it's not the right time (for it) to happen, and we start doing whatever we can (whenever we can) to bring people to Jesus.

But let's be clear. Don't miss the point. It's not going to happen by simply doing all of the right things, living in all of the right ways. It's only going to happen when we respond to one who makes it happen.

We are not called to fish. We are called to follow. Jesus invites us to "Come and see," and then he commands us to "Go and tell." An invitation to explore and a command to expand. Amen.