

“The Active Word”

Psalm 40:1-11; 2 Timothy 3:10-17

January 15, 2023

To begin with, I want to ask y'all a question – Why are you a Christian? Some will rightfully be thinking “I’m a Christian because God chose me to be one.” You’d be right of course. But in the question I ask, “Why are you a Christian”, I’m looking for more of an earthly dimension. How did God work to make you a Christian here, on this earth? That’s ultimately how God worked out WHY you’re a Christian. The strong likelihood is that we’re all Christians because somebody or a group of people taught us about Jesus Christ. People took the time to explain to us the story of God’s redemptive plan and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it all added up. It made such deep sense that we can’t imagine life any other way. Maybe it was a Sunday school teacher or several people within a congregation. Perhaps it was a pastor. But at some time, someone met your need to learn more about God by teaching you how to follow this Christ.

For me, one of those people was David Chadwick. As I’ve shared with you in the past, I had a great epiphany one morning at Sharon Presbyterian Church. But as amazing as that was, I don’t know that the experience in and of itself would’ve sealed the deal so to speak. As a new Christian, I emerged from that spiritual experience with questions – LOTS of them. Each and every morning Rev. David Chadwick would come into the Starbucks where I was working to get a coffee. Here I was, just supposed to fix him his morning pick me up and instead I’d inundate him with questions. I’m chatty, y’all know that, right? Imagine me with access to unlimited coffee? So full of questions and all hyped up on caffeine, I’d ask David whatever it was in our faith I was curious about. If he could answer quickly, he would. Sometimes he said the questions I had were too big for a snappy answer, so we’d set up a time to talk more about it. And that just names one person who helped me learn about Christianity. The fact of the matter is there were countless people who taught Bible studies and shared the language of our faith we me along the way. One, a son of this church, Mack Sigmon, taught my very first Bible study class – it was on Philippians, I’ll never forget it.

So, for me, someone never raised in the church, I answer the question why I’m a Christian by saying that it was the result of ongoing efforts of dedicated Christians teaching me. Truth be told, people are still teaching me. When we sit around in Bible study, it’s routine for me to be learning from others just as much as I’m hopefully teaching them. That’s the way God moved in my life and I think it happens that way to most people who come to faith later in life. I believe lots of people encounter the power and love of the Lord in such a way that leaves them longing for more. Sometimes the feeling holds and turns into action left all by itself. For the most part though, the experience fades quickly away unless informed by something or, more specifically, somebody else.

I’ll never forget the movie Grand Canyon. In the film, Steve Martin plays a thoroughly obnoxious movie producer. He makes the lowest-common denominator type of movie. Action flicks filled with meaningless sex and violence. During the course of the movie, he gets shot. He lives but spends time in the hospital. One morning, he’s just staring out into the beautiful day from his hospital bed and experiences a taste of the divine. He explains to his friends that following that experience, he’s a changed man. He swears he’ll never make another violent movie again. It seems as though he’s taken a profound turn and he has...for a while. Then, towards the end of the movie, we learn he’s producing a new flick – “Cyborg Cop Killer” or something of the ilk. One of his friends asks him “What became of being so profoundly moved that he was going to alter his whole way of doing things?” “Oh, that” Steve Martin says. “That was probably just the pain killers talking.”

I believe lots of people each and every day have a spiritual experience. One in which their lives are shaken to the core by the power and providence of a merciful God. But you see, even those grand experiences that only the Lord makes possible are oftentimes left to wither back into apathy unless someone is there to continue to fill in the blanks.

Think back for a moment to the question I asked you at the beginning of the sermon. Why are you a Christian? One way to answer it would be to say the Lord made you a Christian by putting the right

people into your lives at the right time. When you were ready, you were blessed to have people knowledgeable enough about faith to share it with you in a convicting manner. They came into your life and offered words of instruction given to them by a good and forgiving God. So yes, you're a Christian because someone taught you how to be one.

But you know what? There's a reason why you're a Christian that stretches back even beyond that. To answer the question "why you're a Christian" requires us to look back all the way to the time of our reading from Acts. At some level, you're a Christian because Paul evangelized the Gentiles. He taught non-Jews about God's divine drama of redemption and then they, in turn, taught others in a continuum that leads right up to your front doorstep.

Today, from our Acts reading, we've heard of the experiences of Paul immediately following his encounter with the Risen Lord. As we know, Paul was a vehement persecutor of the early church. And yet, as Paul is persecuting the church, like a whirlwind, the Lord touches Paul's heart and blinds his eyes. But NOTICE – he's not the only one who's moved by God in this deal. In his divine providence, our Lord sets Ananias on the path towards gathering in the shell-shocked Paul when he needs it the most. The two speak. Paul's eyesight is restored. He's baptized.

But that's not the end of the story. Acts tells us following his Baptism, Paul's spends several days with the disciples in Damascus before heading out into the world to evangelize the Gentiles. Admittedly, Acts doesn't say what occurred during those fateful days. However, Paul himself sheds some light on what went on as he speaks to the Corinthian church. There he tells them – *"For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures."* Here's the amazing thing – According to Acts, *Jesus didn't teach him* that, not directly in their encounter. Jesus directly caused the spiritual upheaval in Paul's life but it was those teachers of the faith in Damascus who educated Paul in what it meant to be Christian.

And there we unearth yet another valid answer to why you're a Christian. You're a Christian because unnamed, long-since forgotten Christians at Damascus educated Paul in the ways of Christ. They handed on to him the most incredible story in the whole wide world. Paul would've known some of the story, but it took them to fill in the totality of the picture. They taught him a story of healing and redemption, not only for humans but for all creation. As they shared that story with him, they taught Paul the vocabulary of the Christian faith. And we've never got to lose sight of the fact that what those disciples did, they did so ultimately as a reflection of God's ongoing activity in the world. The church is the body of Christ here on earth. So, the church is called to carry out the activity of God in this broken world. It has NO other purpose.

And our God is an educating God. Throughout time, the Lord our God has worked to teach His people about Him and His ways. From the Garden of Eden forward, God has always looked to inform us so we'd experience the full measure of joy found only in Him. We were created for communion with Him and HE desires that for us. So, He gave commandments and laws and proverbs so that we might fully enjoy that communion. God gave the Scriptures to teach his people about Him and how to draw nearer to Him. In Jesus Christ, God arrived in the flesh and taught us while He was redeeming and saving us. Just look at any New Testament concordance and what you'll see is Jesus referred to as Teacher more than anything else. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ is almost always engaged in the act of teaching. As the body of Jesus Christ on earth, the church is called to teach everyone about the wonderful provident God who has instructed us.

The problem is that for so many years, we Christians have forfeited the educative task given to us by a teaching God. We ourselves haven't studied his word. We don't as a group largely know the fullness of the story we're a part of. We can only barely speak the language of our faith. Worse still, the vocabulary and celebrations of our faith has been co-opted by a secular world that doesn't share our definitions. Sin is treatable with drugs and psychotherapy. Christmas is for tinsel and trees. Easter is for eggs and bunnies.

Where this all comes from is a self-centered perspective on Christianity. Too many of us Christians in America have reduced our faith down to the point where it makes no difference whether or not we have any knowledge of the Lord or His ways. We think “just as long as I believe, what difference does it make that I don’t know much about the Bible.” We think – “As long as I’m good and believe everything will just be fine.” That attitude borders on work-righteousness but, moreover, it’s inherently selfish. The same outlook which works to divert us from the work of gathering the poor, the sin-sick and the brokenhearted also leaves us bereft of the ability to teach others about God’s goodness. Again, we see the drift to make Christianity about US and not about God’s purpose to restore all creation. That’s the ongoing story of God’s love we’re presently experiencing in this world. And for that reason, learning MORE about God is the duty of all Christians. In Romans, Paul calls it “*being transformed by the renewing of our minds.*” Just as God is renewing Creation, so too is he renewing us by teaching us more about Him. But on top of that *it’s a joy to learn more about this wonderful Lord we worship in Jesus Christ.* Right now, God is redeeming creation and we’re a part of this ongoing plan. Our lives are caught up in a cosmic drama that has a happy ending the likes of which we can’t hardly imagine. And that means that even on our WORST days, we’re participating in something of ultimate value and goodness. But in abandoning an ongoing Christian education for ourselves, a path in which we neglect Sunday school or scripture study or learning the ins and outs of our faith, we deprive ourselves of knowing the full richness of God’s ongoing mercy. But even more important that even that – we deprive the world of its essential teachers.

One pastor tells a story of taking a car journey with his family through Florida. While they were in the middle of what he remembers to be miles and miles and miles of orange groves, they stopped at a diner. The pastor recalls that from their family’s booth in the restaurant, they could look out and see orange trees heavy-laden with fruit right beyond the parking lot. So his family all ordered orange juice. Sadly however, the waitress responded by saying that they were all out of orange juice that morning. *The machine had broken.* Surrounded by orange trees and yet no orange juice.

Here in the South, we’re surrounded by churches and yet, for a large part, they’re not many people willing or able to teach the faith to others. We all profess Jesus Christ but few have taken time to truly drink in His Word. Fewer still are able to articulate our Christian beliefs with coherence. In a way, that means our machine is broken. Remember all of us are created in the image of God. That means every one of us reflect not only God’s desire to love others but also His aim to teach them. Sure, some of us will be more gifted at it at others, but to cede learning or sharing our faith exclusively to them is to fall well short of God’s intent for us all.

Rev. Bill Essum says that the basic law of congregational life is this – “Churches grow when they intentionally reach out to others and churches die when all they do it take care of themselves.” I certainly believe it to be the case. If you aren’t interested in learning more about God because you don’t think *you* need it, consider what that says about your desire to touch other people’s lives!

In a lot of ways, our church has been pretty fortunate over the last several years. We’ve kept our head above water but we really haven’t done much more than that. As I said a few weeks back, in the coming year, we’re going to have to refocus our church in light of the fact that we can only tread water for so long. To revitalize, we’re going to need to relearn what God is doing in the world so that we, as a church, can do likewise. We must reclaim our true identity as the body of Christ in the world. I have a dream for this church and its one I hope you’ll come to share! I dream of a church that swells with members. And we’re going to do it by more intentionally reaching out to the world around us that’s filled with the poor, the hungry, the broken-hearted and the sin-sick. It’ll take time, it’ll take energy and dedication. It’s going to require more of us all. But by the power of the Holy Spirit working through us, people WILL arrive as we cleave ever-closer to what God would have our church do and be. And they’ll all come HERE seeking the answers for their lives that only God can provide. As a congregation, WE must prepare ourselves NOW for their arrival. And we do so by enriching our own faith through the intentional study of Scripture and the acquiring greater fluency in the language of our faith.

So I say to you – seek out learning in whatever ways it’s available to you. Pick up a Bible and read it. Come to me or to others with your questions. In so doing, you’ll find your own faith strengthened as you take in the story of a wonderful, provident God. You’ll acquire the rich vocabulary of our faith. We’ve got a remarkable, wonderful story, revealed to us through the Word. We’re entrusted with a language which flows from God’s abundant mercy.

And if you’re not willing to do it for yourself, I ask you to do it for the Christians that will soon be arriving here, *at our church*, many of them just like Paul, touched by the hand of God but requiring ongoing instruction in the faith to bring them to the fullness of what their life can become.

The ultimate answer to our question – Why are you a Christian? It’s this – You are a Christian so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, you teach someone else how to be a Christian.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.