

How are you at keeping score?

I can be pretty good at it. I learned it well at an early age. When I was growing up, I was often looking at what my sisters were getting or doing. If we went out shopping, and one of them got a shirt, I thought I should get one too.

When there was one banana left, we each made my mom cut the banana the long way, so none of us would be cheated.

When we shared M&M's, we made mom count out the same number of colors for each of us.

Looking back now, it seems ridiculous how I kept score. But the reality in my life is that I have kept score. And most of the time that I have it has been pretty ridiculous. Nor has it really helped me.

I have kept score not just on the little things, like Banana's or M&M's, but on the big things, too. Like being hurt, or being left out, or being slighted. This hasn't helped me all that much either. How are you at keeping score? Has it helped you much?

What I have found is that keeping score allows me to hold on to hurts, grudges and pain, long after they are useful. I have found that keeping score actually gets in the way of being open to God, open to others and growing in faith.

One of the stories of the bible that has haunted me is the story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers. Much later in the story, after Joseph has lived through some pretty challenging things, and he rises to power in another country. He is in charge of helping a world that is suffering survive, when he meets his brothers again.

At first they don't recognize him. When he finally reveals who he is to them, he says a most amazing thing to me. He says, "What you

did to me, what you intended for ill, God has taken and made something good out of it."

Wow! Those words of Joseph amaze me. Because instead of being driven to keep score and get even, Joseph had learned to trust God for his present and for his future. He wasn't driven by keeping score; he was driven by something else.

We are in the midst of a sermon series called *What If . . . Rethinking Faith for Today*. In this series, we want to take a look at different ways we can live life, ways that may actually be more helpful to connect us with God and allow us to grow in faith.

In our scripture for today, we read a parable about a fig tree that for three years has not produced fruit. The owner wants to cut it down. The owner has been good at keeping score, three years, no figs. Let's get rid of it.

But we are told that the gardener wants to give it one more chance. The gardener wants to till the soil, to fertilize, to water and see what happens. The gardener is willing to work at it for growth to occur.

It seems to me, that if we are going to cultivate a different set of values for our life, if we are going to grow in our faith, we are going to have to work at it as well. We will have to become like the gardener, doing what is necessary, so we *CAN* grow in our faith.

If you are here today, and you want to be serious about growing in faith, I offer a few suggestions for you. Suggestions that are serious about building healthy faith practices into your life.

Doing things like (1) Coming to worship regularly. When we come to worship, we are reminded that we are not alone. We are a part of a larger community of faith. We are a part of a family of God. Each of us has responsibilities as a part of that family.

Our responsibilities are to help each other connect with God and grow in faith. Our mission statement says that the mission of our church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ through worship, through Spiritual Growth, through fellowship, and through service to others. That is something that we do together. Each one of us is needed to help our church fulfill this mission. Worship is where we come to be reminded of our connectedness.

(2) If you want to be serious about growing in faith, take time to work on your relationship with God through prayer. I have included a method for prayer in our bulletin for today. It is certainly not the only method for prayer, reflection and study. But I have found it to be immensely helpful in allowing our relationship with God to develop, deepen and become meaningful.

(3) If you want to be serious about growing in faith, find ways to be in mission and ministry in the world. Susan is going to talk more about this next week. But growing in faith always involves nurturing our faith on the one hand (like worship and prayer) and living it on the other (connecting with people, meeting the needs that are around us in the world).

When we nurture our faith, we open ourselves up to experience God's love. When we share our faith through mission and ministry, we open ourselves up to sharing God's love with the world.

Many years ago, I was early in ministry and I witnessed a scene that touched me deeply. I was standing in the hallway, watching as the children had finished their last day of in the daycare program just before the Christmas break. I was visiting with some parents. I looked up to watch a cute, rambunctious, sometimes obnoxious little blonde boy run out of his class. He saw both of his parents and he was obviously

excited to see both parents. He had a brightly wrapped package in his hands.

He tried to put on his coat, and wave to his parents, while running and holding onto his present. But he slipped and fell. The "surprise" flew from his grasp and landed on the floor with an unmistakable ceramic crash.

The child's first reaction was stunned silence. But then he started to cry with an inconsolable wail. The father jumped into action and tried to minimize the incident. He patted his son on the head and said, "Now, it's all right. It really doesn't matter, son. It doesn't matter at all."

But the little boy's mother rushed to her son. She dropped on her knees to the floor and swept the boy in her arms and said, "Oh, honey, I am so sorry." Then she started to weep with her son. She didn't just cry, she wept.

It was my turn for stunned silence.

I have thought about it a lot. It seems to me that God we worship. The God we follow is not one who dismisses us, but rather, falls on the earth beside us and picks up our torn and bleeding spirits and says, "Oh it does matter. You matter."

For those of us who are so good at keeping score, maybe it is time for us to learn a new way of living. Maybe it is time to work at growing in our faith, so we can discover how much we matter to God. May God help us live lives of faith.

Amen