

Do you ever have a problem believing someone?

I had a great joke sent to me via e-mail recently. It seems as if Pinocchio, Snow White, and Superman are out for a stroll in town one day. As they walk, they come across a sign: "Contest: Looking for the most beautiful woman in the world."

"I'm entering!" said Snow White. After the contest she comes out and they ask her, "Well, how'd ya do?" "First Place!" said Snow White. Yea!

They continue walking and they see a sign: "Contest: Looking for the strongest man in the world."

"I'm entering," says Superman. After the contest he returns and they ask him, "How did you make out?" "First Place," answers Superman. "Was there any doubt?"

They continue walking until they see yet another sign: "Contest! Who is the greatest liar in the world?" Naturally, Pinocchio enters.

After the contest he returns with tears in his eyes. "What happened?" they asked.

He said, "I came in 2nd; who the heck is this Brett Favre, anyway?"

I love it. It is true, our actions speak louder than our words. How we act says more about what we believe than what we speak. The challenge for Brett Favre as he moves into the future will be to have his words become consistent with his actions.

Don't get me wrong. I like Brett Favre. I am sad that he is not with the Packers anymore. Even though I like Aaron Rogers and how he is doing. But Brett Favre has lost a lot of credibility in recent years.

But he not the only one, for those of us who follow Jesus Christ, who are committed to living out our faith in the ministry of the church, our credibility is suffering a lot too. We just might be as blind to it as Brett Favre is.

We live in a world where there are more people not attending church today than those who do. That has happened for the first time in the history of our nation. And it has happened during my lifetime, on my watch, on our watch. Personally, I find this troubling. Right now, it is estimated that between 75 and 80% of the people in any community in this nation, don't go to church.

It is not that people are not religious, or not spiritual. Many are. Many are longing to find faith. Many are longing to discover a relationship with God that makes a difference in their lives. They just don't see us in the church as a reliable aid to help them connect with God and grow in faith. We have a credibility problem.

(Watch Video - beginning through the question "What do you think the purpose of the church is?" and the first man to respond, "Actually, I don't know" Stop right after that!)

We are beginning a new sermon series today called *What If? Rethinking Faith for Today*. This sermon series is meant to get us thinking about our faith today, and how we can allow our faith to give us meaning and purpose. It is to help us look at how we can develop a meaningful faith for living in our world today.

Jesus, in a passage right after the disciples were focusing too much on themselves and the privileges of following Jesus reminds them and us, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me*. Jesus is reminding them and us, living a life of faith is primarily not about us. It is about our learning to live for God.

It is about learning to put God's desires for our world, first. It is about learning to care for what God cares for in this world. We have a credibility problem, in the church, because we as members of the church have come to see the church as primarily where we come to take care of ourselves and get our needs met and we have forgotten that it is a place that is also to launch us out into the world in the mission and ministry of Christ. We have come to see the church as a hotel for saints, instead of a hospital for sinners and those in need.

Edward Hammett tells a powerful story that describes the challenge facing the church. He says, "At the age of 17 I accepted a call to ministry. I

didn't know exactly what it meant at the time, but I knew God was doing something in my life. I became deeply involved in the church.

They even brought me on staff and said, "help our Sunday School grow." I said, "Okay. I can do that. They even gave me a small salary that helped me to pay expenses in my first year of college. The pastor told me that one step in helping the church grow was to provide more space for babies. To reach young families in our area, we needed a bigger preschool area.

So I started contacting new families in the community and inviting them to church. Amazingly they started coming. Then we were really pushed for space.

So I went to my grandmother's Sunday School class that had been meeting in the same place for about twenty years. She was in her sixties at the time and hers was the last class before heaven in our church. It was pretty sparse in membership, but they had a nice big room, with pictures on the wall of those who had gone before.

I was stupid enough to walk into that room one Sunday morning with those ladies, most of whom had diapered me in the church nursery, and say, "We've got a lot of new babies coming into our church. The nursery is packed, and your room is bigger than their room. We would like you to swap rooms"

It made good sense to me. But not to them. Those five women were ready to kill me. Before we got out of church that Sunday morning, the whole community knew that little Eddie had upset the older women's Sunday School Class. I don't know how they got the world out, but it was terrible.

Our family used to go to my grandmother's house after church for Sunday dinner. Grandma told me to come on that Sunday. No more fried chicken. It crushed me. I don't know what was worse, no fried chicken or knowing that my grandmother was mad at me. And I couldn't even understand what the problem was. I thought they'd want more babies in church. I thought they liked babies.

Over the next eight months, what I came to understand is that these five women were family for one another. The place where they met was sacred space. My grandmother and I loved each other and we decided that we would

talk once a week, we would pray and read scripture together until we could find some sense of reconciliation in this broken relationship. It was painful. I can't even tell you how painful it was for both of us.

After about eight months of these weekly dialogues, she called me over one afternoon. It was not the appointed hour we had agreed upon and I said Okay and went immediately to her house. When I got there, she sat me down in the same little place we used to sit when I was four or five years old, on the front stoop of the porch.

She put her arm around me and said, "You've told me about some mistakes you've made as a young and inexperienced pastor. But I've been praying a lot and have been talking to some of my class members. God has convicted me of my position on this matter. I have come to understand that my personal comfort is not as important as this church's mission." She shifted and said, "I'm going to walk into class on Sunday morning and I'm going to tell those ladies, not ask, that we need to move down the hall.

And on Sunday morning, she walked in and looked at those four other women; "Ladies, I've come to understand that our personal comfort is not as important as this church's mission and its future. I want us to move today to the class down the hall, and I want us to take a little money out of our kitty, and I want us to fix up our new room. But I also want us to fix up this room that we are leaving for the new babies that are coming in. I want it to be nice, and I want us to start and adopt-a-grandchild ministry in this church for all these new families coming in that don't have grandmas and grandpas locally. I want us to learn to love these babies. We need them as much as they need us, and I want us to be a part of the future of this church instead of the stumbling block to keep it where it is.'

Then she picked up her chair and walked down the hall, and every one of the women followed her. They didn't say a word. They didn't ask a question. They simply became involved in mission, right there in their own church.

Living a life of faith is about God. It is about living for God's mission in this world. That is what I want to do. Will you join me?

Thanks be to God. Amen