

**Bringing out the Best: Commitment & Compassion**

***“Who Are We? Reclaiming an Identity”***

**Romans 12:1-2**

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We've been working through a sermon series called “Who Are We? Reclaiming an Identity.” ... Really it's about understanding our identity, as people of God and as people of the Sun Prairie United Methodist Church. The foundation for our series is our mission statement. Let's say it together (found on the front of your worship bulletin):

The mission of Sun Prairie United Methodist Church is to invite and welcome people to be committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ, through worship, through spiritual growth, through fellowship, through service to others.

We are called to invite and welcome others to be in a committed and compassionate relationship with Jesus. That's a big task ... because really we can't do that until we are in a committed and compassionate relationship with Christ. What a big job. It has two parts: as we shine for Jesus we invite others to be a part of that light.

Talk about commitment: Did you hear the one about the guy who spent an entire year following every rule in the Bible? (This isn't a joke ... its true!) AJ Jacobs, author of the book *The Year of Living Biblically* spent a year carrying around a list of more than 700 rules and prohibitions identified in the Bible. When asked if he's a more religious person because of this experiment, he claims no. When asked if the yearlong experiment changed his life, he answers yes.

Jacobs was interviewed by Newsweek as he prepares for October 9, when his book goes on sale. I couldn't help but think of commitment when I read this article. Some of it is very humorous, but there are also some great nuggets of wisdom found in his experiment.

“The experience changed me in big ways and small ways. There’s a lot about gratefulness in the Bible, and I would say I’m more thankful. I focus on the hundred little things that go right in a day, instead of the three or four things that go wrong. And I love the Sabbath. There’s something I really like about a day of rest that is set aside.”

“One thing I learned is that the outside affects the inside, your behavior shapes your thoughts. You can view life as a series of rights and entitlements, or a series of responsibilities. I like seeing my life as a series of responsibilities. It’s sort of, ‘Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God.’”

“The Bible affected every single part of my life, it affected the way I walked, the way I dressed, the way I hugged my wife, the way I ate. The year was the most extreme makeover of my life.”

Jacobs shares that once his experiment ended, he felt unanchored without his list of rules. He says that part of the attraction of organized religion is the structure. From his interview: “We all talk about freedom of choice, but there’s something very attractive about freedom from choice. A life of faith provides structure, mooring, anchoring. Should you covet (desire something that’s not yours)? No. Should you give 10% to the needy? Yes. It really structures your life. After the experiment was over, I felt unmoored, overwhelmed by choice.”

Jacobs lived his biblically-based year as an experiment. This whole article raises questions for me. Do I live my faith-based life as an experiment? Or do I commit to a life a faith because it’s proven that a life of faith makes a difference?

**How committed are we?** Has faith made a difference in your life?

How do you get in the pool? How do you get in the pool? The toe approach – the testing? – which leads to the slow wade because you don’t want to over-commit? Or the cannon ball? That would obviously be the enthusiastic approach, obviously.

I like this image for commitment: how one enters the pool.

If I wade in – the toe approach – then I take my time getting involved. I'm not really committed. But if I jump right in, I'm committed. There's no turning back.

So, how do you get in the pool?

When it comes to our role in the life of the church, how does God expect us to get into the pool?

When it comes to MY role, God expects me to jump in, and not just a wimpy little dive, but a full-fledged cannon ball, so that others will get wet; others will be touched by God's love.

When it comes to YOUR role in the life of the church, doesn't God expect the same? Are you a toe-tester or are you a cannon-ball jumper?

Now some of you are sitting there thinking, "Well, of course she's committed because she gets paid." I do get paid, and I thank you for that. It is my job to be committed ... I think that's in a job description somewhere ... but it's also my responsibility to be committed. I'm committed because of all the gifts, the grace, and the promise of new life each and every day. I'm committed because when I embrace all God's gifts, God has something to work with, and God can bring out the best in me.

I like what Jacobs had to say in his interview about living Biblically for an entire year: "You can view life as a series of rights and entitlements, or a series of responsibilities. I like seeing my life as a series of responsibilities. 'Ask not what God can do for you, ask what you can do for God.'"

During a recent visit to my parents' home, my mom and I spent some time looking through photo albums. We were reminded of a time in our family's life – about 17 years ago – when everything was completely out of control. I had stepped away from the church prior to all that chaos, because really, I didn't have time for the church. I didn't have time to be committed, let alone involved. I was a young professional woman, married, with a small child, and busy, busy, busy with life. We were moving, searching, settling, and growing. I was far too involved with ME to add on any kind of a church commitment.

I had grown up in the church. God spoke to me mostly through music and community, and God spoke to me at an early age, but I gave all that up for what I believed was a life of success and fulfillment.

Life in my extended family became so completely out of control. My parents' very healthy lifestyles were compromised with cancer and epilepsy ... debilitating diseases. My maternal grandmother was dying a very slow and painful death. My brothers' lives were full of loss and compromise: one whose leg was amputated because of diabetes; another living a lifestyle that would eventually land him in the hospital, in a coma; another losing everything in a business deal gone bad. My best friend was diagnosed with cancer and I was so far away. The straw that broke the camel's back: almost 6 mos into my pregnancy with Eva, everything about the pregnancy became very high-risk. Everything that meant the world to me was compromised.

It was then I reentered a life of faith. It was then that I reclaimed my identity as one of God's children. It was then that I walked through the doors of a church and said to God, "take me, use me, fill me, mold me."

I haven't thought about this in a long time. I forgot that I wasn't a part of the church when chaos reigned in my life. I didn't make the connection – the connection that when everything was going wrong is when I reclaimed a life of faith. I didn't make the connection until I worked through two questions this week: am I committed? And why?

It's my responsibility to be committed. When I embrace what God does for me, then God changes me from the inside out, bringing out the best.

Are you a committed? Are you a committed and compassionate follower of Jesus Christ? If you answered yes to that, how are you holding that light up so others can see and follow?

What does commitment and compassion do for us?

Have you ever noticed what happens to people when they become committed to a sports team? Have you ever noticed that? They can't let it go ... they're full of team spirit. They display team colors proudly. They brag up their team members. They take pride in victory and if they're really committed, they accept loss, understanding that their team did the best they could. Do you know anyone like that?

I've been to Lambeau Field for a Packer game and it was darn near close to a religious experience for me. I've been to the top of the mountain! What I found most amazing: the community. I was drawn into a community of believers, becoming one in the spirit. I was moved by the spirit of community and charged by the spirit of enthusiasm. I became a part of the community, because those who had experienced the spirit were inviting and welcoming. Okay, so I'm really stretching this illustration, but honestly, I want that for the church.

That's what I believe commitment and compassion do for us: it unites us as one in Christ.

It is our responsibility to live as committed and compassionate followers of Jesus Christ, so that others might follow. It is our responsibility to perfect the cannon-ball so that others might be splashed with God's love.

Amen.

