

The Jesus Walk

1 John 2:3-6

One hundred years is a long time. Consider the changes in our nation since 1908 that our children have just reminded us of. One hundred years is a long enough period of time for people and organizations to forget even the most basic issues of self identity and purpose. Seminal questions such as “Who are we?” and “Why are we here”? can become lost over the years.

Let me give you some examples: did you know that Harvard, Yale and Princeton Universities started as Christian institutions? Harvard and Yale were both started by the Puritans. Harvard was named after a pastor. Yale was started by a pastor. Princeton’s first year of classes were taught by a pastor. Princeton’s crest, written in Latin, says “Under God she flourishes”. Yet over the course of their history the identity and purpose of these universities has changed dramatically. These esteemed universities are now reluctant to share their Christian story and heritage. Students there are commended for showing interest in world religions and even in new age spirituality but are challenged if they acknowledge a belief in the Bible and Christianity.

This phenomenon is true not only for institutions of higher learning. It is also true for the church. Consider the seven churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. None of these seven churches are in existence today. Yet once they were of such great significance that a voice from Heaven – the voice of our Lord Jesus – spoke to them through these seven letters. But today, nothing is left of most of these cities other than their archeological ruins.

There is a cycle to life for our world. It is true in nature as we enjoy the transition from one season to the next – spring, summer, fall and winter. The average life expectancy in 1908 was 47 years of age. Today, one hundred years later, the average life expectancy is 78 years of age. While thirty years have been added to the average life expectancy over the last one hundred years, it is still a one to one ratio. We do not live forever. There is a cycle to life.

Even churches have a life cycle. There are four easily identifiable stages of the church life cycle: the infancy stage, the growth stage, the aging stage, and the dying stage. (Illustration) Some

have reduced this to three stages for the church: the risk-taker stage, the caretaker stage, and the undertaker stage.

In the early stages of a church there is a high sense of mission and purpose. There are clear responses to the basic questions of “who are we?” And “why are we here?” Let me quote Fred Hill as he wrote of our history, “The Deer Flat Free Methodist Church began in 1904 with the vision and faith of a few settlers who had come west to homestead on the Deer Flat plain. They came with hopes of changing the rugged Idaho desert into lush and productive farmland. They came with a strong Midwestern determination and an ever-stronger faith in God.” In those early days our Deer Flat Church first met in homes, and later in the Huston School. Land was then donated by Pleasant Dotson. (Recognition of Robin Trotter – the great, great granddaughter of Pleasant Dotson.)

Money was raised to build our first church structure by cutting and hauling sage brush, women who took in laundry, and families who generously gave from their own resources even while they still needed to build their own homes and farms. (Picture of early white church)

Our Deer Flat church has had more than one growth stage, which is one of the primary reasons we are still in existence with as much vitality as we enjoy today after one hundred years. Some of our best growth years came under the ministries of Jim McMillan and Kay Cole. Both of whom are here today along with other special guests including some of our former pastors and superintendents. (Read names and invite to stand – Rev. Jim McMillan, Rev. Roscoe Bell, Rev. Kay Cole, Rev. Doug (Linda) Bailey, Rev. Ed Burns, Rev. Raymond Bates.) Let’s thank them again for their faithful leadership to our Deer Flat family.

One of the responsibilities of any church when it is enjoying its best years is to share the resources that are at its disposal. In honor of our 100th anniversary, we have completed a modest capital campaign. Our initial goal was to raise \$100,000 and our intent was to use \$60,000 to continue the next phase of building renovations in our youth and children’s areas. But we also made a commitment to give away 40% of what came in. We prayerfully selected the Clear Blue Project to provide wells and clean water in Africa recognizing the connection between the needs of water here in the Treasure Valley for our pioneering families and even for us today.

To my amazement, money began to come in almost immediately. And this morning we are reporting that you have given a total of \$148,864.72. \$84,518.83 has been designated for our building fund and used to continue the next phase of the building renovations in our youth and children's areas. This morning we are making our youth and children's areas available to you with an open house. We invite you to walk through and see not only the renovations but how these strategic and if you will historic parts of our building are being used in ministry today. Our children are using the old fellowship hall area and our youth are using our former worship center. I think you will be blessed as you see these areas and think of the hundreds of youth and children that are ministered to each week.

But back to our capital campaign. We asked you for a goal of \$100,000 and promised to give 40% of that away – to the Clear Blue Project for wells and clean water in Africa. We have raised a total of \$148,864.72 and we have given 46% of that away. We received another check just this week and to date we have been able to give \$64,345.89 for clean water and new wells! Clear Blue now has projects either underway or under consideration in Malawi, Nigeria, Kenya, India, Haiti, and most recently in northern Iraq at the invitation of local government leaders. (Pictures of wells) Even our children have been a part of this generosity and our Children's Director, Julie Walker, has a special presentation to make at this time. (Receive check from children.)

We have just put in place a new Missions Guidance Board – Gordon Jensen, David Wood, Jeff Maendl, Jeff Swanson, Mike Benedick, Helen Nelson, and Kathy Lewis. (Invite to stand and be recognized.) It is my prayer that under the leadership of our new Missions Guidance Board our Deer Flat family will only continue to increase in our generosity to share from our resources. This is an expression of the heart of the Deer Flat Family. We want to be like Jesus so we are motivated to give generously to help care for the needs of our neighbors – locally and globally. We want to help others be like Jesus so we are motivated to give generously so that others will hear the good news of Jesus' love. I am asking our new Missions Guidance Board to pray that our Deer Flat family will not only support missionaries sent out by other churches, but that we will once again send out our own missionaries. We should pray that some from our young people and our retired people will consider the call of God to dedicate a portion of their lives to go and help others be like Jesus.

This morning we give praise to God that we are able to once again light our candles. This past week two people have prayed to accept Jesus. Many of us come into this family room for worship every Sunday and look to see if the candles are lit. And we are truly blessed in that so many Sundays we have this blessing of seeing the candles lit and knowing that at least one person has either committed or recommitted their life to Jesus. But in so many churches this is not the case. Did you know that one-half of American churches will report no conversions in 2008?

History teaches us that churches don't normally stay in the growth stage forever. Time marches on and the life cycle continues as so many churches move into the aging stage. Studies indicate that two-thirds of American churches are either plateaued or in decline. One study estimates that 80% of American churches are either in the aging or dying stages of their life cycle.

You can tell when a church has entered into the aging stage. Conversations begin to change. We begin to hear more and more nostalgic comments. The good old days are wistfully remembered. Then the nostalgia turns to disappointment. Frustrations are expressed that today doesn't look and feel like what was remembered from yesterday. And unless there is an intervention, the aging life cycle left uninterrupted will most often result in anger. Plateaued and declining churches have a well demonstrated pattern of becoming angry with one another. And if you listen carefully, the anger is not a righteous indignation. It is so often and sadly an anger that personal interests and preferences are not being met. It is not an anger that the daring faith of the founders is being lost. It is not an anger that fewer and fewer people are becoming like Jesus. It is an anger that comes from a self-focused church.

Churches in this aging and/or dying stage have been described this way – these churches are like a car full of people being driven down a crowded highway at night with only one light on. And that light is the interior dome light. The headlights are off. The people in the car can see one another but they are dangerously oblivious to the outside world careening past them.

Our world is changing and it is changing at a pace faster than at any time in our history. Some of that change we are glad for and some of that change we are not so glad for. People think differently today. Our world used to ask, "Does God exist?". Today they ask, "Which God is

real?” For many people their faith is no longer tied to the institutional church. Sunday morning is no longer sacred.

Many who love the church say that in some areas we the church have been too slow to change. They lovingly say to the church that if 1957 returns we will be well prepared for it. 1957 is not coming back, but we are well on our way to 2057. Every church needs to know the difference between the essentials and the non-essentials. What is an essential? Worship. What is a non-essential? What time we worship.

I read this week that the first coffee house was opened in Italy in 1654. Many religious people viewed coffee as immoral. In 1674 a group of English women formed a movement called the “Women’s Petition Against Coffee” declaring: “Coffee leads men to trifle away their time, scald their chops, and spend their money”. The church will always get in trouble when we confuse the non-essentials with what is truly essential.

At the center of our challenge is the need for us to prayerfully hold onto what is timeless as we consider what maybe outdated. Here is what we are learning – Jesus is timeless. Jesus is not outdated. Even those who are weary of organized religion have a longing for the real and authentic Jesus. Friends – this is who we are as a Deer Flat family and it is why we are still here after one hundred years. Our heart is to be like Jesus and to help others be like Jesus. This is based on the commands of Jesus. It is our irreducible minimum. And friends, our neighbors – our community – our world is hungry for Jesus. If we will continue to walk as Jesus walked, they will join us on the journey to be more like Jesus.

As we celebrate our 100th anniversary I believe that we must become all the more resolute not to take the presence and blessing of God for granted. We succumb to a sinful pride if we think we have arrived. We naively deceive ourselves if we think that we are immune to the gravitational pull of the aging process. It does happen, and it can happen even here at our beloved Deer Flat Church.

But as our Deer Flat Church demonstrates, the life cycle of a church can be interrupted. (Illustration) Churches that enter into an aging season and a stage of decline can be renewed. We have had extended seasons of renewal with growth and revitalization that have helped us break

out of periods of plateau or decline here at Deer Flat. How does that happen? Let's look at the word of God. I invite you to turn with me to 1 John 2:3-6. (Read)

One of the keys to long term viability for a church is to focus on the irreducible minimums. When Jesus began His ministry He confronted a church that had taken Ten Commandments and developed over 600 religious rules and regulations. Jesus had a way of reducing all of that down to the most basic elements. Jesus gave us two commandments. The first we call the Great Commandment. In Mark 12:29-31 Jesus identifies the greatest of all commandments is to love God and to love our neighbor. Jesus said that all of the law and the prophets are completed in this commandment.

The second commandment that Jesus gave us is called the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:16-20 Jesus said that we are to go and make disciples of all nations. What is a disciple? A disciple is a follower, one who is learning to be like Jesus.

One of the reasons why half of American churches will report no conversions this year, and one of the reasons why two-thirds of American churches are either plateaued or in decline is that they have forgotten who they are and why they exist. They have grown cold in their love for God and for neighbor. Some have forgotten the call to help others be like Jesus.

The heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus and help others be like Jesus. How can we be like Jesus? The irreducible minimum is that we must love God and love our neighbor. Let's look at our verses for this morning. In Vs 3 we read that "we know that we have come to know Jesus, if we obey His commands". And what are His irreducible commands – first, love God and neighbor and second, go into all the world and help people be more like Jesus. When we obey these commands, we are becoming more like Jesus.

But let's keep looking. In Vs 4 the Bible says that if we say that we know God but in reality we are not obeying Him, we are liars and the truth of Jesus is not a part of our lives. Here is what I understand this verse to mean ... my life is a lie unless I am obeying His irreducible commands to be like Jesus by loving God and neighbor and helping others be like Jesus.

There is more ... in Vs 5 the Bible says that if I am obeying God's Word, God's love becomes complete in my life. The presence of God's love in my life is how I can know that I am

becoming like Jesus. Remember the story of the rich man who came to Jesus. It is a story from Luke 18. This person comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus begins by telling him that he must fulfill the commandments: “do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother”. The man responds by saying, perhaps somewhat proudly, that he has done all of these things from his youth. Jesus says that there is one thing lacking in his life in spite of all of this obedience. As a demonstration of his love for God and his neighbor, Jesus instructs this man to “sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, and follow Me.”

Now, how do we apply this story to our lives today? Is Jesus instructing each of us to sell everything that we have and give it to the poor? Is Jesus saying that unless we do this we cannot be like Him? No, I don't think this is the best understanding of what these verses are saying. Rather, I think Jesus is saying that if we love all that we have more than Him then we are in trouble. If our love for what we have is greater than our desire to be like Jesus and help others be like Jesus, then Jesus is telling us that there is something lacking in our lives. Even if we keep all of the other commandments, unless we love God and neighbor more than we love the things of the world then there is something lacking in our lives.

This is summarized as we look at Vs 6: “Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did”. Sometimes we have to look for the irreducible minimums of life. This is one of the best antidotes that I know of for a church and a people wanting to resist the gravitational pull of the inevitable life cycle. How does a church like Deer Flat resist the gravitational pull to fall into an aging stage? How does a church like Deer Flat extend a season of growth and renewal? I think this is a verse for us to lay hold of as an anchor. “Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did”.

We need to learn and relearn “the Jesus walk”. We need to walk the talk. Our world today is frankly so tired of religious talk that so many of them have just stopped listening. To so many in our world today, if we mention church they inwardly shut down and look for their first opportunity to disengage and walk away. Denominations don't have the same appeal in our world today. We can tell them all about our international denominational family now

approaching one million members in almost eighty nations. We can tell them about our seven colleges and universities here in the United States. We can tell them about our rescue missions, and our residential rehabilitation centers, our orphanages, our medical clinics and hospitals. But if we don't have "the Jesus walk" – if we don't walk the talk they aren't listening.

Religion doesn't have the same appeal in our world today. Even inviting a friend or neighbor to the 100th anniversary of our beloved Deer Flat Church doesn't have much appeal to many in our world today. We can tell them about our truly awesome children's and youth programs. We can tell them about our ministry to the Latino community. We can tell them about our ministry to the senior community. We can tell them about our worship and music. But if we don't have "the Jesus walk" – if we don't walk the talk they really don't care.

The Jesus walk! Jesus transformed His world. He turned it upside down with His teaching, preaching and healing. Love your enemy He said. Pray for those who persecute you. Go the extra mile. Give more than is asked for. Turn the other cheek. The Jesus walk!

Today we gather in this place to celebrate the blessing of one hundred years of ministry in the Treasure Valley and beyond. We give thanks to God for the faithful and daring pioneers that gave birth to our Deer Flat family. We celebrate the countless stories of lives radically transformed by the grace of God.

In the midst of our celebration, I believe we also have a responsibility to take a look around. We need to look toward heaven and ask "How is my love for God"? We need to look at one another and ask "How is my love for my neighbor?" We need to look at our Deer Flat family and ask "Who are we" and "Why are we here?" Are the answers clear? Can everyone who is a part of our Deer Flat family from the seniors and the children and the youth and our Latino brothers and sisters say with one voice – "the heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus and help others be like Jesus"? (Place and screen and repeat together)

You see, even if our neighbor says that they don't believe in religion and they don't trust denominations and they don't need church, they will notice "the Jesus walk". It is contagious. It will turn our world upside down just as it did when Jesus walked this earth. May I say it again? Our goal is not to be the first or the biggest or the best. Our goal is not to be another Willow

Creek, or Saddleback, or Lakewood Church. This is Idaho's Treasure Valley and we are Deer Flat. Our heart is to be like Jesus and to help others be like Jesus. No more and no less. This is who we are. This is why we are here.

Last night we gave tribute to one of the pioneering families that birthed the Deer Flat Church. The pioneers that birthed the Deer Flat family are now gathered among the saints of heaven. The Bible says that the saints and angels of heaven rejoice over each and every person who comes to know Jesus and His love. All heaven rejoices each time someone finds new life and purpose and hope in Jesus. What are the stories before us – the stories still unfolding? What are the stories still unfolding of addicts and alcoholics who will find freedom in Jesus? What are the stories still unfolding of orphans and widows who will find that they too have been adopted by Jesus? What are the stories still unfolding of prisoners and aliens who will find love and acceptance in Jesus? What are the stories of children and youth still unfolding who will find meaning and purpose for life? What are the stories of broken marriages and relationships still unfolding that will find healing and wholeness?

What is my dream for the next one hundred years or for as long as the Lord gives us to continue His mission until He returns? What is my dream for Deer Flat? We must learn the Jesus walk. We must walk as Jesus walked. There is no place for grumbling and complaining. There is no time for fussing and fighting. We must walk the Jesus walk. We must love the way Jesus loved. We must live the way Jesus lived. We must invite our neighbors to walk with us. We must go to the poor and suffering and bring them a cup of cold water in Jesus name.

Once a man and his son were walking along the beach. As they walked, they noticed the many starfish that the incoming tide had left stranded on the shore. If left on the shore they would soon die. The child repeatedly knelt, picked up a starfish, and tossed it back into the sea. Finally, the father said to the boy, "Son, don't bother throwing each starfish back. There are so many, and you can't save them all. You're just wasting your time. What you're doing doesn't really matter." The boy knelt, selected another starfish and replied, "But it matters to this one."

Jesus came to change the world. I think Jesus wants us to change the world. At times this may seem overwhelming. One person may not be able to change the world, but we can change the

world for one person! It all begins with the heart. And the heart of the Deer Flat family is to be like Jesus and to help others be like Jesus. It's called ... the Jesus walk.

Prayer.