

Launch Into the Deep: The North Star

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This morning we continue our series of messages entitled “Launch Out into the Deep.” Growing spiritually is like launching out on a ship into the deep waters. The adventure begins when we leave the shallow ponds and move out into the deep water. When we decide to launch out, we have to decide who is going to be the captain of our boat. Are we going to steer our own boat or will we let the Creator of the Universe take over the controls and guide us where he wants us to go? Are we going to be passengers or members of the crew? Do we want to be served or to serve? Have we connected with our shipmates—other believers in small groups to encourage and help each other on this voyage? Last week we began to look at our destination which is to experience the fullness of God’s love. This morning we will continue to look at our destination and how it aligns with our mission and vision as a church. Jesus tells us how to stay focused on our destination.

Mark 11:15-19

On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple area and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, ¹⁶and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. ¹⁷And as he taught them, he said, **"Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'"**

¹⁸The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

¹⁹When evening came, they went out of the city.

Several years ago, Margaret and I took a cruise in the Caribbean. One night we walked around the deck of the ship and found ourselves at the bow of the ship. There were no headlights on the ship. There was nothing in front of us but the blackness of the ocean and the sky. That afternoon we took a tour of the bridge and saw all the sophisticated navigation equipment for the ship. We saw the radar and the GPS devices that showed our exact location and mapped out our course. Even though it was pitch black outside, we knew that the crew was well aware of where the islands were around us and the location of other ships in the area. I could not help but wonder what it was like for Columbus and other explorers who sailed across the ocean. They had none of the modern navigation equipment. They had no idea where land was and wondered if they were going to drop off

the edge of the earth. Most people believed that the earth was flat and there was a place where the sea dropped off into nothingness. During the day the crew set their course by the sun. At night they set their course by the stars, particularly by locating the North Star. Focusing on this star kept them on course through the darkness and enabled them to discover new worlds and prove that the earth was round.

Our vision statement captures the destination of our lives: to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Fully devoted followers of Jesus experience the fullness of Christ. They are filled with his love. The process of becoming fully devoted followers of Christ is called spiritual growth. This church is designed to enable you to grow spiritually. Our mission statement describes the environment in which we can grow spiritually. In the context of an accepting, transforming, equipping and sending community, we can grow to become all that God created us to be. I talked about our mission statement extensively last week. The Christian life begins with accepting God's love as a gift. Everything we do to grow spiritually is in response to the love of God we have received. We do not participate in spiritual growth activities as a way to earn God's favor. We participate in spiritual growth activities as our response to God's love we have already received and as a way of opening ourselves to deeper experiences of his love and transforming power.

As we move toward our destination of becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus, there are three core values that guide us on the journey: loving God, loving others and serving the world.

God first loved us. When we receive his love, we want to return his love. Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart. Everything in the Christian life revolves around a love relationship with God. How do we experience that? One of the analogies that the Bible uses to describe our relationship with God is marriage.

Christ is the groom and the church is his bride. A love relationship with God includes some of the same ingredients that make for a good marriage. What is usually the first thing identified in marriage seminars and books that makes for a good marriage? It is open and honest communication. Couples in healthy marriages discover the need to set aside time regularly to be together. They may set aside a date night once a week for just the two of them. They also know the importance of checking in with each other throughout the day. A phone call to say: "How is it going today?" "I was just thinking about you and wanted to say 'I love you.'" These couples make a special effort to share with each other their dreams and their struggles. They make time for each other.

The same is true in our relationship with God. To have a healthy growing relationship with him we need to have open and honest communication. We need special times with him. Regular, weekly Sunday worship is like our date night with God. During the weekdays we have ongoing conversations with him. "God, I love you." "God, I need your help." "God, what do you want me to do today?" We have two-way conversations with God. These conversations we commonly call prayer.

In our scripture this morning, Jesus became angry at the money changers who were cheating people in the monetary exchanges required to purchase animals for the sacrifices at the temple. He overturned their tables and drove them out of the temple with a whip. He said: "My father's house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers."

Jim Cymbala, pastor of Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York, points out the significance of Jesus' choice of words. Jesus did not say, "My father's house shall be called a house of preaching." Preaching is important but it is not primary. Jesus did not say, "My father's house shall be called a house of music." Music is important but it is not primary. Jesus said, "My father's house shall be called a house of prayer." Prayer is primary. It is the way we

communicate with God and essential to our relationship with him. Talking with God should not be a burden anymore than talking with our spouse should be a burden. When we love someone we want to talk with them. God loves us and wants to talk with us. Many people say to me, "I don't know how to pray." I've said it many times, let me repeat it: "If you know how to talk, you know how to pray." Prayer does not require a foreign language. Prayer does not require a special vocabulary. Prayer is talking in your own words to a father who loves you and just wants to hear your voice. Prayer is listening to your heavenly father express his love to you deep into your soul.

On this spiritual journey into the deep, prayer is our North Star. It is what keeps us on track. It is what navigates us through the dark experiences of life. Prayer connects us with the source of power to get through the storms of life.

In casting the vision for our church for the next year, I've identified a priority focus for each of our three core values. In this value of loving God, our priority is to move toward becoming a House of Prayer. It is my desire that prayer initiates, builds and sustains all that we do. So often we make our plans and ask God to bless them. In a House of Prayer, we seek to align with God's plans and listen to his heart.

We already have a wonderful prayer ministry lead by Mary Kay McCauley. We have a prayer chain, a prayer room, pastor's prayer partners and prayer shields around our staff. We have several moms' groups who come up and pray for their children. If you want to learn more about conversation with God, I would encourage you to come to the class called "When God's People Pray" using videos from Jim Cymbala at Brooklyn tabernacle. It starts tonight at 6:30. And it will also be offered on Wednesday evening for six weeks. If you want to find out about prayer opportunities, pick up one of the prayer ministry brochures in the foyer at the brochure rack.

I want to let you know about two new things that are happening in the area of prayer. Every morning our sanctuary is open from 7:30 to 8:30 for a time of prayer. When you arrive, there is music playing and you can have time of personal meditation and prayer. At 8:15 those who desire to do so, gather at the altar and pray for our church and community. This is a “come and go” time. You can stay as long or as little as you like. You can pray silently or out loud. The Prayer Room is open whenever the building is open—usually from seven thirty to nine thirty each week night.

The other new prayer experience is the Healing Room. Every Thursday night from 6 to 8 pm, there will be people here to pray with you for healing. You might want to receive prayer for your own healing or the healing of a loved one. You can request prayer for physical, emotional, spiritual or relational healing. You will come to the foyer and then someone will take you into the sanctuary where you will be seated. A prayer intercessor will stand behind you and silently cover you in prayer. Then, when you are ready, you will go to the prayer room with a team of three people who will pray specifically for your request. God responds to prayers of healing in a variety of ways. This time will help you to open yourself to God’s healing power. More information is available in the brochure rack.

Prayer is our North Star that guides us through the night toward our destination of becoming fully devoted followers of Jesus. It is the key to our experience of loving God.

Another core value is loving others. Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is to love our neighbor as ourselves. The Bible encourages us to love one another as we have been loved. A healthy spiritual life includes experiencing relationships with other believers to encourage one another, pray for one another, care for one another.

William Mahedy who works with college students discovered that a high percentage of them had experienced divorce of parents, psychological, physical or sexual abuse, date rape, and overexposure to media violence. These experiences led to widespread problems

with stability, self-image, feeling of emptiness, depression, suicidal thinking, fear of the future and lack of hope. Abandonment is the foundational life experience of many young persons. They feel abandoned by parents, loved ones, teachers, political leaders, even the culture itself. They feel like a generation alone. (John Burke, No Perfect People Allowed, pg. 267-268).

These young persons find it difficult to connect in relationships because of past experiences of abandonment. They find it difficult to trust persons who reach out to them and offer relationships for fear that if they risk trusting they will be abandoned again.

We place a high value on encouraging each member to become involved in a small group. We offer a variety of groups: study groups, ministry teams, recovery groups, mission groups. Our priority this year is to offer relational/ community groups. These groups will offer a place for persons who are looking to connect with persons who have a natural affinity. Some of the groups will meet in homes. Some of the groups will meet on Sunday morning as an alternative to Sunday school. The main focus is to spend time together building relationships through caring for one another, encouraging one another and praying for one another. If you are interested in being a facilitator for one of these groups, you can come to Small Group Basic Training which begins tonight at 6:30 in room 14 downstairs. A number of young adults have visited our church and left because we did not offer these groups. If you are a young adult, single or married and would like to be a part of launching this ministry, then come tonight to the training.

Our third core value is serving the world. We are extensively involved in serving the world with ministries like Family Promise, Backyard Mission, Good Samaritan food voucher ministry, Clothes Closet, Prison Ministries, and mission teams. A few years ago we began a drug prevention ministry and did some good things like our "Get Smart" information program for parents. We have gotten off track in meeting this need, and it is still a burden

on my heart. I hope to resurrect this one of the ways we serve the needs of our world. My plan is to call together a group of like-minded pastors to begin to pray about this problem and other needs in our community and see how God leads us to make a difference.

Another burden on my heart is that we would resurrect a ministry to special needs persons of all ages. Right now, we have no place for them in our church's ministry, and the need is great. If you are interested in helping to launch a ministry to persons with special needs, please let me know.

I'm excited about the priorities our church will pursue in the coming year. As we pray together and make ourselves available to God in response to his love, amazing things are going to happen. Are you ready to follow the North Star and launch out into the deep?