

Launch Out into the Deep: Even Keel

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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 serve or be served? Have we connected with our shipmates—other believers in small groups to encourage and help each other on this voyage? Today we are going to look at the destination where we are sailing and how we get there.

Ephesians 4:11-16

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

How many of you watched the Olympics a couple of weeks ago? It was exciting to watch Michel Phelps as he won a record eight gold medals. Today the Olympics are secular events where winning athletes receive medals around their necks.

Originally the Olympics were sacred contests performed for the Greek gods. The first Olympic games were held in Olympia in 776 BC. The athletes competed to win the favor of the Greek god, Zeus. The winner of each contest did not receive a medal but rather a wreath made from olive leaves. Other regions of Greece began athletic contests to honor their regional gods. In Corinth the games were held in honor of Apollo, the god of music and poetry. Apollo was fond of the laurel tree. The winners of the

contest in Corinth received a wreath made of laurel leaves. Each region worshipped a different god and provided a crown for the winner made from a different type of leaf to distinguish their champions. In his letter to the Corinthians who would be very familiar with this custom, Paul says: “Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” (1 Corinthians 9:25)

The goal or destination of our spiritual lives is to receive the “crown of righteousness”—which means to experience a right relationship with God for eternity. It is a crown which will not wilt like the wreaths made from leaves. It is a relationship with God that will last forever. Our goal is to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” To become like Jesus means to experience the same love relationship that Jesus has with his heavenly Father.

LakeRidge UMC seeks to provide a place where you can grow and develop in your relationship with Jesus Christ. This church exists to enable you to grow spiritually. Our mission statement describes the environment that promotes spiritual growth: “an accepting, transforming, equipping and sending community.” Spiritual growth begins when we are in a place where we are accepted as we are. In order to be free to grow and change we must first feel secure and loved. Spiritual growth begins by being immersed in God’s love. Our church needs to be a place where people are saturated with God’s unconditional love and acceptance.

Unfortunately, most of us feel that God’s approval is something we have to earn. We are like the ancient Olympic athletes who believed that winning the race gave them favor with the gods. We think that when we perform well, God rewards us. When we don’t perform well, God punishes us. In his book, He Loves Me, Wayne Jacobsen describes this as “daisy petal Christianity.” We constantly play a game with God of “he

loves me; he loves me not.” We judge how well we are pleasing God by the circumstances in our lives. Jacobsen gives these examples:

I got a raise. *He loves me!*
I lost my job. *He loves me not!*
Something for which I prayed happened. *He loves me!*
My child is seriously ill. *He loves me not!*
A friend called unexpectedly to encourage me. *He loves me!*
My car needs a new transmission. *He loves me not!* (He Loves Me, pg 18)

We struggle with why a God who is supposed to love us would allow such things into our lives. We feel like abused children who never know what God we will meet on any given day—the one who will scoop us up in his arms with laughter or the one who will ignore us or punish us for reasons we don’t understand. Our relationship with such a God is based on fear. If we don’t earn his approval then bad things will happen to us. We are motivated to do good and avoid sin so that God will not be angry with us.

Many people become Christians primarily because they are afraid of God and want to avoid hell. To accept Jesus as their Savior gives them a “get out of hell free” card. “Those who seek to follow God only because they don’t want to go to hell never discover how incredible a Father he really is. They see Christianity as an onerous burden and don’t want to do one bit more than they absolutely must.” Fear of hell can produce instant commitments, but it seldom results in long term, joyful discipleship.

A young woman came home from church one day. Her father asked her what the sermon was about: “Same old thing. God is good. You are bad. Try harder.” Unfortunately that describes many persons’ perception of the Christian life. We are constantly either trying to please God or run away from him.

It grieves God when our relationship with him is based upon fear and self-effort to please him. The Bible makes it clear that the very nature of God is love. God’s greatest desire is for us to experience his unconditional love. All we have to do is open up and

receive it. Jacobsen describes it this way: “When that love touches you, you will discover there is nothing more powerful in the universe. It is more powerful than your failures, your sins, your disappointments, your dreams, and even your fears. God knows that when you tap the depths of his love, your life will forever be changed.” (He Loves Me, pg 92)

“Perfect love casts out fear.” (I John 4:18) We do not have to fear an uncertain future, the rejection of friends or failing health. Knowing God’s heart frees us to trust him no matter what happens to us. We know that he loves us, and he is with us and nothing can separate us from his love.

There is nothing we can do to make God love us more. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves us simply because we are his child. Our only choice is whether or not to live loved, trusting that his eye is on us and that he can work out in us everything that he desires. God has done everything he can do demonstrate his love for us. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have life everlasting.” (John 3:16) The proof of God’s love for us is that he gave his life for us. He gave his life to overcome sin and release us from its power. He gave his life to overcome the sin that separates us from him so that we might experience his love.

The key to spiritual growth is not waking up every day trying to be loved by God, but waking up in the awareness that you are already loved. “People who learn to live out of a genuine love relationship with God will live in more power, more joy and more righteousness than anyone motivated by fear of his judgment.”

We seek to be an accepting community—a place where people are offered God’s grace. We extend to others the grace of God which we have experienced. I have experienced God’s grace through this church. Over nearly 30 years, I have failed a

significant number of times as a husband, father and pastor and yet grace has been extended to me in this place. This community has provided me with the opportunity to open myself to God's grace and experience his love. When I rest in his love, my life experiences a deep inner peace no matter what is happening to me. Sometimes it is a struggle for me to remain in his love. It is easy to get back on the treadmill of seeking his approval. Freedom and growth occur when we receive his grace. We are an accepting community.

I've spent most of our time on what it means to be an accepting community because it is the cornerstone of our spiritual lives. Unless we have this piece in place, nothing else about spiritual growth matters. Until we receive God's love as a gift, we see spiritual growth as one more thing we do for God to earn his approval. When we live in God's love, then we are free to grow by the power of his spirit working in us. Growing spiritually becomes a joy and not a burden.

We are an accepting community. We are also a transforming community. We offer abundant opportunities for you to experience God's transforming love. God loves us as we are, but he never leaves us where we are. He wants us to become all he created us to be. Especially in small groups we discover those places where God wants to help us become more than we are.

We are also an equipping community that promotes the discovery and use of spiritual gifts. Every Christian has a spiritual gift. It is the gift God has given you to join with him in his work of redeeming the world. We want to provide a place where you are free to explore your gifts. We want to help you develop that gift and use it for the kingdom of God. Again not to earn God's approval, but out of gratitude for the love you have received.

We are a sending community. We recognize that the spiritual gifts are not given for our own benefit. They are given to enable us to become part of the crew—to be able to give to others. We provide many ways for you to use your gift both inside and outside the walls of the church. Several of our members have been sent out to foreign countries to spread God’s love.

Our mission statement describes the environment in which we grow spiritually. Our vision statement defines the target of spiritual growth: “to become fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” We want to become all that God has created us to be and join with him in his work of redeeming the world.

There are three primary areas of spiritual growth that need to be developed as we grow spiritually. As we launch out into the deep, we need to keep all three of these in balance. We will be growing in different areas at different times in our lives, but over time we need to be sure that we are developing in all three. That is how we keep an even keel. A sail boat that does not have an even keel is leaning to one side or the other. Sometimes in our spiritual lives we focus too much on growing in one area and our lives become spiritually lopsided. We need to give God freedom to work in every area of our lives so that we become balanced Christians. The three primary areas for spiritual growth are: Loving God, Loving Others and Serving the World. Loving God has to do with our relationship with God. Loving others has to do with our relationship with other believers. Serving the world has to do with those outside the church and taking care of God’s creation.

Take out the “Balance” insert in your bulletin. On the center flap you will notice a spiritual growth wheel. The three primary areas of spiritual growth are found in the center. Each of those areas is broken down into sub-areas of growth to help you better identify where you may need to grow spiritually in order to have a balanced Christian

life. Loving God means we: experience personally God's love and forgiveness; pursue truth in God's Word and we Respond Gratefully as Stewards. Loving others means we follow the Spirit and connect in caring relationships. We become a part of a Sunday school class, a spiritual growth group or a ministry team. Serving the world means we "live" others to Jesus. By the way we live we help others to connect with the love of Jesus. Serving the world means we impact the world. We make a difference in addressing those things that rob people of becoming all that God created them to be. We join with God in the battle against social injustice, poverty and abuse of his creation.

This church is all about providing you with the environment and the tools to grow spiritually. Spiritual growth begins with the acceptance of God's love of you just as you are. Did you wake up today with the awareness of how much God loves you?