

First Things
Matt. 2:1-12, Eph. 3:1-12
January 4, 2008

The News Journal offers an Online Poll question every day. On January 2, the question was: “Did you make any resolutions for the new year?” Seven hundred and seven people responded to the poll question. Seventy-five percent of them said “no.” If that rather unscientific poll is any indication, I would guess that the majority of *us* have not made any resolutions either. The thing about New Year’s Resolutions is that we rarely keep them. That’s why so many people don’t make them. But this is traditionally the time of year when we look back over the year just past and think about the year to come. Have you set any goals for yourself for 2009? Maybe you want to lose a few pounds, commit to an exercise program, quit smoking, spend less time on the internet, spend more time with your family and friends. What is your top priority for your life in 2009?

Perhaps the most basic difference distinguishing human beings from the rest of creation is that people can set priorities. The word ‘priority’ comes from a Latin root, and it means something that precedes or comes before everything else. A priority is something of leading importance or urgency in one’s life. What one lives for or the shaping value for one’s life. Whatever comes first in your life is your priority. Unlike animals or trees, we have the ability to rise above our natural impulses and set priorities, make choices about what values will shape our lives. And the priorities you choose will determine what life means to you, how you live it, and who you become. What precedes everything else in your life? What comes first? What is your priority?

The Magi who came to Jerusalem from the East knew what their priority was. “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.” They dropped everything else, saddled up their camels, and came seeking ‘the One,’ the King, to worship Him. This search took precedence over everything else in their lives at that time. The apostle Paul knew what his priority was. “To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ...” *The Message* says it this way: “This is my life work: helping people understand and respond to this Message.” Paul’s priority, his life’s work, the first thing in his life was proclaiming Jesus’ love and acceptance to everybody, most especially those who were far from God.

In these readings, we also discover *God’s* priority and purposes: the revelation of His grace and glory in Jesus. That’s what the Magi recognized: Jesus was the One who was sent by God. Paul writes that it was through the church that the wisdom and purposes of God would be revealed. From the very beginning, God’s purpose and priority has been the revelation of His majesty, glory, and grace to the world. The revelation of Himself. And the primary way God revealed Himself was through Jesus. The primary way God reveals Himself now is through the followers of Jesus, the church.

Jesus’ purpose and priority for people was clear. “Follow me.” As we follow Jesus, we become more and more like Him, and so we will reflect Christ to the world. That phrase should sound familiar to you: It is part of our mission statement. So here’s my priority for us this year, church: I want 2009 to be a year in which all of us grow as followers of Jesus. I want us all more and

more to reflect Christ to the world. To show the world what God is like. Jesus made His priorities for His followers clear. “Love God, love people. Make disciples.” Not ‘make *believers*’ though certainly one must be a believer before one can decide to be a follower, a disciple. But it’s not just *believing*, it’s following. Jesus invited people to *follow* Him, not just *believe* in Him. If you’re following somebody, you’re going somewhere. To say we are followers of Jesus implies we are on a journey. Following implies movement, motion. It doesn’t matter where you are or where you’re not with God, God wants you to MOVE. God wants you to be somewhere ahead of where you are now in your journey with Jesus by the end of 2009. God wants you to MOVE FORWARD. God wants you to be more like Jesus. To live like He lived. To serve like He served. To give like He gave. To love like He loved. But this does not come naturally to us. So Jesus says, “Follow me and I will show you how.”

Listen: You will not drift into following Jesus. You will not drift into serving like Jesus or living like Jesus or loving like Jesus. You will not drift into making the Christ-following life your priority. You will need to decide. You will need to decide to make becoming more and more like Jesus your priority.

If you decide you want to move ahead in your spiritual journey this year, if you decide you want to grow as a follower of Jesus, you need to start by determining where you are now. When I go to MapQuest looking for directions, I first have to type in my starting location. I have to know where I am *now* in order to get directions to where I want to go. So the first two questions we need to ask as we set our spiritual growth priorities for this year are these: First, *Where am I now?* And secondly, *Where do I want to be?* Where are you now in relation to God? Is your spiritual life deep or shallow or practically non-existent? Is your spiritual life satisfying and rich or frustrating and superficial?

How will we know if we’re growing spiritually? Well, let’s define spiritual growth the way Jesus might have defined it: When you are growing spiritually, you will experience an increasing love for God and an increasing love for other people. So where are you now? If you desire to move ahead, to grow in your relationship with God, you first need to know where you are now.

Some research has recently been done to help understand the practical ways in which people grow spiritually. As a result of that research, a spiritual continuum was identified to help people answer the question, “Where am I now?” Let’s explore this continuum and see where you might find yourself:

Exploring Christ: “I believe in God, but I am not sure about Jesus. My faith is not a significant part of my life.” You find yourself here on the continuum if you have a basic belief in God but are unsure about Jesus and His role in your life.

Next are those who are Growing in Christ. “I believe in Jesus and I am working on what it means to get to know Him.” You are in this group if you have a personal relationship with Jesus. You’ve made a commitment to trust Him with your salvation and for your eternity, but you are just beginning to learn what it means to be in a relationship with Him.

As you grow, you find yourself Close to Christ. “I feel really close to Christ and depend on Him daily for guidance.” Folks in this segment of the continuum see Jesus as someone who assists them in life. On a daily basis, they turn to Him for help and guidance for issues they face.

And finally, there are those whose lives are Christ-Centered. “God is all I need in my life. He is enough. Everything I do is a reflection of Christ.” People in this group would identify their relationship with Christ as the most important relationship in their entire lives. They see their lives as fully surrendered to Jesus and His agenda, submitting everything else to His will and His desires.

So – *where are you now?*

Now, it’s not enough, of course, just to know where you are. The second question is “*Where do I want to be?*” Once you identify where you are with God, you will need to determine where you want to go. And once you know where you want to be in your relationship with God, you will need to determine what you need to do to get there. So our third question is: “*What’s Next for Me?*” We want to be very practical here. It’s no good recognizing where you are (or where you aren’t) with God, and determining where you really *want* to be, without knowing what to do to get there. It doesn’t help me to go to MapQuest and type in where I am and where I want to go. Until I actually get the directions for getting from point A to point B, I’m going nowhere. And unless I am actually willing to set out on the journey and follow the directions, I’m going nowhere.

Where are you now? Where do you want to be? What’s next for you?

There are some practices or habits that will help us to make progress in the journey from Exploring Christ to living a more Christ-centered life. That’s what we’re going to talk about over the next 7 weeks. Habits of Discipleship. Practices for Following Jesus. I’m not talking about involvement in church activities, necessarily. I’m talking about personal spiritual practices. I’m not talking about being busier at church. I’m talking about growing in your love for God and your love for other people. I’m talking about practices that will help you to follow Jesus so as to fulfill the purposes God has for you.

When I googled ‘New Year’s Resolutions,’ I discovered a website called ‘GoalTribe.’ They claim to be: “New Year’s Resolution Simplicity: The Most Advanced Goal Achievement Tool Available.” For only \$9.95 a month, GoalTribe will help you set a goal, build motivation, get support and succeed at reaching your goal! Well, save your money. We can be our own GoalTribe, church. Exploring Christ is a communal experience. Following Jesus is a communal experience. While our individual relationships with God are and certainly ought to be *personal*, they were never meant to be *private*. We travel this journey with Jesus *together*. We learn to love God and love other people best, *together*. And we will grow in our love for God and love for others as we encourage one another, pray for one another, hold one another accountable, forgive one another, cheer one another on, and lovingly correct one another when necessary. We will grow together as we worship together, study together, have fun together, and serve together.

That's my priority for us this year, church: GROWTH. Not necessarily numerical growth. But growth in our love for God and our love for people. So as we begin this new year together, as we prepare to come to the Table, let's take a few minutes to reflect on these questions:

Where am I now?

Where do I want to be?

What's next for me?

It may not be clear to you what's next. We'll be helping you with some answers to that question over the next 7 weeks.