

Steps to Discipleship #1 - Connecting to the Community
John 1:14, Luke 15:3-7, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Brothers and sisters, on July 27, 1981 a young boy named Adam Walsh went missing from a Sears Department store in Hollywood, California.

His mother frantically searched for him, asking the employees and customers in the store if they had seen where he went, but they were not much help and they just went about their business as if nothing serious had occurred.

When his father was notified what had happened, he rushed over to the store, expecting he would find the police on site and everyone – employees and customers - looking and searching to try and help find his lost child – but instead everyone was just carrying on as normal.

And I'm not sure what's more disturbing about this case – the abduction of a child, or the lack of any sense of urgency and help from those people who were there when it occurred.

Contrast that tragic situation with another one – more public and more recent - which took place on April 15, 2013 at the finish line of the Boston Marathon where two home-made explosive devices were detonated in an act of domestic terrorism.

People who witnessed that tragedy tell how bystanders were immediately moved to action – going to help those who were injured, assisting the police and medics to make sure everyone who was hurt was able to get help.

Now I contrast these two situations because they illustrate the different ways in which people can respond to a situation where something has gone horribly wrong.

In one situation people just shrugged off the fact that a little boy was missing and it was business as usual, in the other people responded right away to help those who were injured.

Now what does this have to do with us?

Well let me tell you another tragic story about someone named Adam – who also went missing, you may be familiar with this story as well.

It took place in the Garden of Eden, after God had created Adam and Eve and given them responsibility over the garden.

Adam and Eve, incited by the devil, broke the covenant with God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and at this point Adam, and Eve, went missing from God.

The relationship between God and the humanity was destroyed and the consequences of this one simple act of rebellion would bring suffering for all humans who were yet to come into this world– in fact the story of Adam Walsh and the Boston Marathon bombing is part of that.

And I don't know what is more disturbing, the fact that for no reasonable explanation Adam and Eve would wreck a perfect situation by disobeying God and bring such consequences upon the world – whereby people are lost from God!

Or... the fact that most Christians today carry on with their own lives and interests like it is business as usual with no concern about the fact people are separated from God!

But brothers and sisters, this is why the Lord is calling us to GO OUT! And it's important that we are reminded of the seriousness of what is at stake in being obedient to our Lord's command to *"Go and make disciples..."*

That's why I'm using the example of a missing child this morning, because God is missing some of his children and it's serious and urgent situation and we need to ask what can we do to help find them?

As we heard Jesus say in Luke 15:4 *"Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?"*

And it's why I use the example of how people jumped into action to help those injured in the Boston Marathon

bombings, because that's how we should be reacting when we see people who need to hear about God's love and mercy and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Now, brothers and sisters, if we take the scriptures seriously and we believe what they reveal to us: that those who do not yet know Christ are lost, and that they are in danger of hell should they die without salvation...

Then we will feel a sense of urgency and importance that we need to get out and do something about this!

In fact if we truly grasp the seriousness and the urgency of the situation we might even feel a bit panicky... It's a very serious situation, we should do something... but what do we do? Where do we start?

We can't simply do nothing – but running out and grabbing the first person we meet on the street and urging them to believe in Jesus and be saved from eternal punishment and to

come over to Valleyview in order that we might disciple them – well... we know that is going to be counterproductive.

In the same way when the authorities in Boston Bombing started their investigation they needed to be wise and careful about how they proceeded.

They had to act and do something but they did not want to cause widespread panic, or spread false rumors which could lead to anger and vigilante reactions that could cause harm to innocent people or hamper the investigation.

So instead the authorities relied on the processes and procedures that are designed to help investigate such situations so that they could carefully and calmly gather information and evidence and make good decisions that would allow them to find those responsible and apprehend them and bring them to justice.

And so to brothers and sisters, we need to know that although there is a serious situation that exists; people are lost and

their eternal destiny is at stake... we can be guided by some process and procedures that can help us avoid rash actions or inaction and go about the work that Jesus commanded us to do.

And so over the next two months we are going to be looking at Steps to Discipleship, eight stages that break down the process of what needs to happen for someone as they go from being lost to becoming and fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ.

This will help us understand what we need to be doing as a Church, why and how Valleyview is structured to help this process along, and also help us identify our role in being a part of Valleyview and last but not least, it gives us a chance to reflect on where each of us are in this discipleship process.

Now, whenever an investigation takes place the authorities need to gather evidence and information what do they do? They send out detectives and officers to go and talk to people

in the neighborhood – find out who saw anything, who knows anything etc...

And the number one factor in how successful the authorities are going to be in getting people to talk to them and share information is how well they are connected to the community.

If they are not well connected, if there are no relationships of trust and respect, if they do not understand the people and/or culture of a particular community – then it will be very difficult to gather information from them.

However if the community trusts the authorities, has personal relationships with them, if they are regularly around in the shops and businesses getting to know people, understanding them, being a part of their everyday life...

If they have made good connections to the community then people will be more than willing to co-operate and help them gather information for an investigation – we can understand how this works right?

So, brothers and sisters – the first step for the Church, for Valleyview, in the process of making disciples is to build those good connections to the community, and in making those connections to our community we need to be *“incarnational...”*

And being incarnational is of course what the apostle John describes in the opening chapter of his gospel, and he summarizes what the incarnation was all about very clearly in John 1:14 *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”*

Now there is all sorts of background information that can be brought forward to give context to this statement that John makes, and help us understand the who and the why and the how to what is being said here, and that is good and has its place...

But, just consider what is being stated here in its most simple form - that God, the uncreated, all powerful, all knowing, all present, divine being who stands outside of the creaturely

limitations of time and space - becomes a part of His creation, taking on flesh, our humanity, our limitations, and he lives life among us, as one of us...

Just that on its own says volumes about who God is and what His character is like and... what He thinks about humanity, about us...

In this incarnational statement we see a God who is willing lay aside who He is in order to become something else, and the fact that what God lays aside is so much greater and awesome beyond comprehension in order to become something that is categorically and realistically lesser than Himself would certainly seem to indicate that God sees something of significance in humanity, something that is important, and some might even say something that He loves.

In this incarnational statement we see God reaching out and coming to us – we see God becoming Jesus Christ... who said *“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and*

go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep'.

That is the heart of the incarnation.

So brothers and sisters, as we work at Discipleship Step #1: Making Connections with the Community- we need to do so with the intention of being incarnational as we connect.

Because the truth is that we are already out connecting to the community everyday... right?

The last time I checked we don't have any of our congregation living here in our church building, spending all their time on our property, we're not a monastery or a Christian colony with limited involvement to the outside world.

So in many ways we are each already involved in step #1, we live out in the community and we interact with our neighbors.

We work out in the community and we have co-workers, clients, business contacts and so on... We go to school out in the community and we have our school friends and acquaintances... We shop and eat out and get our coffee and go to the movies and socialize in the community.

Brothers and sisters, in this respect we do not lack for connections to our community, but... are they incarnational connections?

You see, another aspect of the Incarnation is that it brings something which is very different, very foreign into this world... as Paul says in Colossians 2:9-10 *"For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness."*

Friends, if Jesus was just a regular human being there would be no incarnation... but because Jesus was fully God becoming human, then the incarnation is an amazing occurrence which brings the normally distant divine into close proximity to us.

So the kinds of connections that we need to build with our community are ones where we are bringing in Christ, where Christ is incarnate through us... because we are in Christ and Christ is in us through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Now, don't get sidetracked at this point by trying to think of all the various kinds of things that you might **DO** to bring Christ into a connection... like trying to talk about Jesus, or being kind or loving or helping people and so on...

Just realize that because you are baptized with the Holy Spirit, the very presence of Jesus goes with you wherever you go – it's nothing that you **DO** per say, it is who you are now because of the work of the Holy Spirit connecting you to Jesus Christ.

So when you are involved in all the connections to our community that you have already established – my prayer is that from now on, the Holy Spirit is going to remind you that you are incarnating Jesus into those connections, simply because you belong to Him.

What you do because of that in those connections will come later on. Do you follow so far?

And... being incarnational in our connections in this sense also means brothers and sisters... that we need to go and be the church – together, in a group – outside of our facilities at times other than Sunday mornings.

You see, we need to incarnate all the amazing stuff that occurs when we gather together for worship out in our connections with the community, the love, the care, the acceptance, the connectedness that we have.

We need connections with our community where they can see us together, where they can see how Christ unites us together in spite of cultural differences, where they can see us work together, where they can see our love for Christ in how we sing and pray, where they can see that we are willing to be identified as followers of Jesus in public.

Now this is something that we need to work on – but I’m pleased to say that we are making progress on this through the missional outreach efforts of our Christ Care groups as they GO OUT together as a group to serve... at the food bank for example.

We also have been given a great opportunity to connect with our community this coming year in the Canada 150 Community Celebrations in September, and we’ll get some more details on that later in the service today.

So, brothers and sisters – let us cooperate with the Holy Spirit to take the existing connections that we have to our community and make them incarnational, and look for new ones, so that we bring the very presence of the person of Jesus into them – both as individuals and together as His church.

Now the other thing about being incarnational in making connections to the community is that it will put us in some rather strange and humbling situations... because it is not

strange and humbling that the Word should become flesh? That the perfect should be clothed with imperfection? That divine should become mortal?

But brothers and sisters, as 1 Cor 1:25 says *“the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom...”*

And so this foolishness of God can help us navigate some of the challenges that the Christian community can have in the kinds of connections that can present themselves to us that we typically try to solve with human wisdom.

Human wisdom says that we should be careful about the kinds of connections we make because of how it will reflect on us, because of what kind of message it might send, because of how the optics might appear...

Yet God’s foolishness in the incarnation means that we might make a connection with the local Mosque or First Nations and not worry if others think we are becoming Universalists who see all religions as the same...

God's foolishness in the incarnation means that we might make a connection and become friendly with those who are looked down upon – by other Christians or by our society at large...

God's foolishness in the incarnation means that we aren't concerned with maintaining proper boundaries about what is decent and respectable and proper and where we should or shouldn't go and who we can or can't associate with, but not because there are no boundaries or morals and people ought to be able to do as they please...

No, it's because incarnational connections bring the very presence of Christ into the situations that need his presence the most! It may be true that other Christian groups are making these kinds of connections as a result of turning away from the uniqueness of the message of Jesus Christ – but we're not.

We're looking to address a serious situation where people are lost and where we need to make disciples of all nations and

we are looking to take Step #1 and Make Connections with the Community.

And incarnation connections mean that we are willing to set aside our preferences, cultural practices, and ways of understanding the world around us and step into someone else's preferences, cultural practices and ways of understanding the world so that we might build an incarnational connection with them that brings with it the presence of Christ.

That is why Paul describes himself the way he does in the passage we read from 1 Cor 9. He says in vs. 21-22 *"To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak."*

You see brothers and sisters, incarnation results in transformation.

When Christ set aside his glory and took on our cursed, fallen, broken, and sin riddled humanity and nature and incarnated himself in it – He transformed it.

He cleansed it from the propensity to rebel and be unfaithful against God, He broke the curse of sin upon it by going through death and being resurrected back to life, right from conception, through birth to adulthood.

So for those who truly understand the incarnation and seek to establish incarnational connections with the community as the first step in making disciples, we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and make those connections regardless of how foolish they may seem to human wisdom – because incarnation leads to transformation.

But most importantly brothers and sisters - and this is the last point about making incarnational connections with our community...

There is something about the action of incarnation, crossing those boundaries, becoming something you are not for the sake of someone else, humbling yourself in doing and so on that defines and communicates unconditional love to others.

And in the first step of making disciples, our goal in making those connections with the community in an incarnational way – is so that they might know someone loves them unconditionally.

There are still seven more steps to go – unconditional love is not the sum total of being disciplined – but it is the starting point that people need to experience in order to start the process.

And it is best expressed and shown by how we go and make incarnational connections with the people in our community.

Brothers and sisters – have you, will you take the first step to making disciples?

Amen.