

## YOU ARE ON A PATH

Imagine that you are out in the wilderness. It is your desire to survive. What are the ten essentials, and would you remember to bring them with you? (You know: knife, compass, matches – things like that.) I know some people who would consider it downright uncultured not to be familiar with such things.

I was listening to a television program a few days ago that was speaking of survival tactics after retirement. They were talking about the five necessary components for a good life: health, a place to live, money to live on, friends who care, and something to do. In this program's view, that covered the essentials.

Whether in the wilderness, after retirement, in high school, or any other time, we might claim that there is another essential more important than any of the ones yet mentioned. In our language, it is usually called "faith." Some of us have come to the conviction that faith is one of the most important dimensions of life – that, in fact, a person really is not well-off without it.

So what are the ten essentials of faith? Or what are the five necessary components for a healthy faith? We could make such lists. We each really should. What an excellent project for a Sunday afternoon. Make a list of five things you have to "take with you" if you are going to have a sound and healthy faith. And after you have your list, take care of it!

It may or may not appear on your list, but one of the things we have discovered down through the ages and in every culture around the globe is that one of the essential ingredients for faith is a group with which and in which to live it. Because faith is so intensely personal and affects us in such private and inward ways, we often claim it to be an individual affair. But history shows otherwise. Faith is always lived and expressed in the context of some community. Even at its most dramatic moments of breakthrough or moments of departure from old ways, faith still operates out of a tradition, in some conscious effort to be accountable to what God has revealed to the community in the past. From such a stance, faith looks to see what God seems to be asking in the present and for the future. Faith is a very personal thing, but it operates and grows in community.

Faith does not grow in a vacuum. People misunderstand why the church keeps urging its members to participate, show up for drill, come to meetings. It's nothing new. The church has been talking this way from the beginning. Maybe sometimes in our day it has been done for crass or materialistic reasons, but normally that's not the case. The plain truth is that people who drift away from the fellowship atrophy. The church does not just tell you to come because it worries about its attendance record. It tells you to come because it knows your faith will shrivel up if you do not. How many great football players do you know who never play on any team? That's how many Christians there are who are not part of any church. How many spiritual people can you name, from any time or place in history, who operated outside of a tradition and a community?

To be sure, there are many and various training programs, approaches, and life-patterns recommended for acquiring and becoming proficient in faith. On this island alone (Mercer Island, Washington), if we count only those with formal staff and land and buildings, there are twelve faith organizations in which you can live and train and grow. People say to me, "Wow, your island is really over-churched, isn't it?" But I think, "Not until each of the twelve has twenty-five hundred members." So no need for us to close down yet.

Have you followed me so far? Faith is one of the essential ingredients of life. Some of us have realized that it is even the most essential ingredient of all. It turns out that faith, while intensely personal, grows and thrives only in community – stays healthy only when attached to a tradition. Therefore, those of us who seek faith and wish to be people of faith must find and attach ourselves to the best training school, parish, congregation, church, or "whatever you want to call it" that we can find. If there is a better tradition or approach than the one we follow here, then we ought to become part of it. If we can find or receive new or different or additional ways to enhance our growth and experience in faith, then of course we will want to adopt them. But we do not just fool around. Faith is too important!

Everyone is on a Path. Their life can be seen as an unfolding story. I believe the Holy Spirit tracks each and every one of us. But we do not see ourselves as being on a Spiritual Path until we awaken to that presence and that reality, start to see the coincidences in terms of patterns, and start to recognize themes and directions and common denominators. That is when we start to get excited about our lives, and about the lives of those around us.

So if you are here, I expect you to recognize by now that you are on a Spiritual Path, that those around you are also, and that everybody is but not everybody knows it yet. And if, knowing that, you have chosen this congregation to be your faith home, your faith community, then glory a little in the Path we are on – in the WAY we try to follow. Claim the disciplines with joy. Try the training programs with enthusiasm. Walk the WAY eager to experience the ways of faith that our tradition claims to be the most authentic.

For instance, there is a reason why our Congregationalist tradition stresses your individual freedom and your responsibility to hammer out your own commitments. There is a reason why I am granted freedom of the pulpit. There is a reason why you are not required or expected to believe or agree with what I say. I am not granted freedom of the pulpit just because our Conference is too lazy to set regulations! Anguish and revelation and generations of scholarship and study and prayer are behind our tradition not to take the Bible literally or approach the Bible as the infallible words of God. We have no firm creed, not because creeds do not take shape and form among us, but because we insist on dismantling them whenever they do.

The reason our denomination and our tradition do these things is because we place so much emphasis on the Holy Spirit. We truly believe, within the United Church of Christ, that you are each on a Spiritual Path, and that the Holy Spirit is in touch and in contact with each one of you who will allow it and cooperate with it. Therefore, we keep clearing the decks and trying to make room, so that the Holy Spirit can have more space and more elbow-room in whatever work the Holy Spirit wants to do with you. You need to know this, and you need to be able to explain it to others. We do not hand you a creed in this tradition because we expect you, in company with the Holy Spirit, to be building your own. If you are too lazy or too unmotivated or too shy to be doing that, then you would be far better off in a creedal fellowship. Do you see that? Any of the great, historic creeds of the Christian Faith are far superior to *no* creed! The vast majority of Christians do live in creedal fellowships.

Our tradition and church were formed by and designed for people who cannot fully embrace or totally commit themselves to a creed somebody else has handed to them. More importantly, our tradition holds that we cannot fully turn our lives and our wills over to the care and direction of God until we stop swearing total allegiance to other human beings, human organizations, or pieces of paper (no matter how lovely the words on them may be).

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Well, I do not mean to get you back into Confirmation Class, or to start a series on the traditions and beliefs of Congregationalism. You are on a Path. I hope you know that. And you have chosen to link your Path to this church – to this congregation and tradition. So know it, claim it, let it help you – or find one you will let help you. Walk this WAY eager to experience the ways of faith, understand them better all the time, and build them into your life with each passing day and week.

Does it make any difference what church you go to? What sermons you pay attention to? What kind of training you get? What group of people you have for your church – your faith family? We always answer NO to such questions – “No, these things don’t make any difference.” We do not want to offend anybody, start any fights, or act superior. And that’s all understandable. But do you notice? This is the only area of life where we would give such an answer! Do you tell your kids it does not make any difference which friends they hang around with? Do you tell each other, when your child is ill, that it does not make any difference which doctor you go to? There are lots of good coaches and lots of good schools. There are lots of good people and lots of good tools. But in every other area of life, we still say it makes a difference. Only when it comes to faith and to the church and to the things of God do we sometimes try to say that it does not make any difference. Any God will do; any religion will do; any church is as good as another. That can only make sense to people who do not intend to spend much time in any of them. And they say to me, “We are all headed for the same place, you know – heh, heh.” I wonder where they came up with such a startling piece of information. It only takes ten minutes in any airport to figure out that this is just not true.

If you come to church every possible Sunday, get involved with the people here, get serious about the disciplines that WE RECALL each Sunday [see the last page of this sermon], and follow them where they lead you, will you have a stronger and more effective and more skillful faith by the end of the year than you would have if you did none of these things? I can promise you: Absolutely, YES! It is clearer and more certain to me than the sunrise. I have watched the principle in action over many years, with quite a diverse cross-section of people, and watched the evidence mount. I have seen people grow strong in faith. I also know what happens to people when life gets tough and faith is thin. But that is *my* experience. Do you know it too?

If it were known to you that, by going to the Covenant Church or the Presbyterian Church, you would end up with a stronger faith by the end of the year, would you continue to come here? You would be crazy to do so. Make your best choice, then give it all you have.

When Jesus said, “*You must become as little children,*” He was thinking of “Disneyland enthusiasm.” A kid walking into Disneyland for the first time wants to see it all – take every ride, explore every corner. I actually know people who come to church with the exact opposite approach. They come to be convinced of as little as possible; to believe the very minimum that they can; to try as few faith disciplines as they think they can get away with and not be kicked out; to let it change them and their way of life as little and as marginally as possible. Even the Holy Spirit just sits back and waits with people like that. Maybe in some other season of life, they will arrive with a more genuine interest.

I just wanted to “straighten the furniture” a bit. Now I want to tell all of you: You are on a Path. Early Christians called it THE WAY. God has plans for your life. You know some of them, perhaps, but not all of them. Parts are clear and parts are dim or misty, if you are like the rest of us. But you are on a Path. Probably by now you know it.

If you are on a Path, what does that actually mean? What is it like to walk this Path? Let me remind you of the ABCs of faith – of walking with the Holy Spirit.

A.) The hardest step, and the first one, is mental. You must assume that God, personally and specifically, is conscious of and cares about and is paying attention to every last detail in your life. Please pay attention to how we phrase this. I did *not* say you had to “believe” it. Humans love to get hung up on beliefs (by which they mean philosophies or theologies, or theoretical arguments with themselves and each other). You can waste years on theoretical beliefs and nothing will come of it. So for this step, never mind believing it. Authentic belief comes after years of experience. We are talking about *walking* the Path – the action side of faith. We take a chance, go do it, see what happens. We can talk about what we “believe” afterwards.

So you *assume* that God knows and cares about every detail in your life, down to the smallest item. You treat it as a working axiom. Whether you believe it or not in any absolute way, you act as if it were true – to the best of your ability.

B.) The second step is the same as the first. I am just trying to break it gently. You also assume that everything you encounter, everything that happens in your life – down to the last detail – is part of God’s design, part of God’s plan for you. Each day is especially designed, created, furnished, and choreographed precisely for you, containing the very things you need to deal with in order to learn and grow and become that which God wants you to become.

In terms of the Path we are walking, then, we refuse to get into philosophical head-trips about accidents, exceptions to the rule, God’s plans for everybody else that cannot possibly coincide with God’s plans for us. We simply say to our minds, if they want to argue: “Good point! Fine logic! I am sure all those points are excellent. But I have no interest in your theories right now. Right now I am following a Path. And the WAY requires that I assume that the days God brings me are the days God wants me to have – down to the smallest detail – each and every day. If I do not assume that, I cannot respond correctly. I will miss the signals. I will not be able to stay on the Path.” (So, dear mind, “Sit down and shut up for Jesus.” In reality, of course, we are not talking to our higher mind, but to our skeptical inner self.)

C.) Once we have this straight, we start looking for God – God’s instructions and guidance – in our everyday experiences and in everyday events: always and *every* day! We stop looking for the “big stuff.” (Big stuff is only a collection of little stuff anyway.) To be faithful in the common, little things becomes our highest aim: how to respond to each new event, in each conversation, in each encounter. We consider all of it part of the Path – the WAY – because we assume God has put it in our way on purpose.

It is imperative, of course, to keep a sense of humor, to keep lighthearted, to be full of gratitude and expectation and a steady conviction that in the final analysis, God actually has our best interests at heart (and in mind). If we started to get grandiose or anxious or heavy-hearted with such a perspective, it would quickly undo us. Sometimes a day unfolds into interruptions or challenges or things going wrong, until our minds are sure that either we are dealing with the absurd or we have stumbled into the core of evil. But if we are on the Path, it does not matter. Well, it matters, but it does not change anything. We just keep trying to respond to each detail as it comes, as if it were a very intentional and carefully designed part of God’s plan for us for that day. We try to respond as obediently as we can, asking for forgiveness when we know we blew it. And we just keep on doing that because the hours and events keep on unfolding.

That's it. That's what it feels like – that's how we take it from our side – when we know we are on the Path, trying to walk the WAY. Of course, we remember that nothing is ever what it seems. What is going on here in the physical dimension does not look the same or have the same significance as it does when seen from the spiritual dimension. We also keep letting our souls practice seeing the difference between these very different perceptions. But that's just for fun. That is not what makes the difference.

What matters is the absolute assumption that everything down to the tiniest detail is part of the plan. And that it is our task – our only real task – to respond to each detail as it comes as closely as we can to what we think God is directing us to do. When we have it close enough, God will move us on to new experiences. As we learn to be faithful over a little, God will set us over more.

Now, you have always known this, right? This is what it means to be on the Path, to walk the Christian WAY – trusting in Jesus or the Holy Spirit or whatever your words are for it. But just in case, I have lined it out for you once again. If by chance this does sound strange or new and you are interested in the Path, you might want to come talk to me or somebody about it quite soon. Beginners can have more trouble with it than you might think. Some of us spend quite a few years trying to do everything our own way before we are willing to try this new WAY. Shifting from “our way” to this WAY can be quite a shock. That's why we call it “conversion.”

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Together, each week, WE RECALL:

It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day, to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, seeking in grace and praise to discover God's will for our own lives on a daily basis. As part of our discipleship, we also work to increase our love for one another. We move earnestly toward tithing to “our” church, that the Kingdom may increase its resources. For the same reason we try to tithe our time and our conversation. Finally, we hope that our faith and love and discipline may increase until they flow beyond our fellowship and become a blessing to others.