

Jeremiah 1:4-10 “Ninety Percent of Success”

I was reading an article by Jackie Luo last month in *Vox* magazine called, “If You’re Wondering Why You’ve Lost Friends in Adulthood, This Is Probably Why.” Long title I know. But the first sentence in her article summed it up pretty well. “What a lot of people don’t appear to understand is that the single easiest way to *make* friends is to show up when it matters — and the single easiest way to *lose* friends is to ... well ... not.” Her article was basically lamenting the increase of “flakiness” in our culture and the negative impact of its acceptance.

We all know flaky people, right? They *sign* up but don’t always *show* up. Calendars and clocks are more decorative than functional. Commitments are fluid and rarely taken seriously. They say they’ll do something, but when it comes down to really counting on them, you’d better have a backup plan or else you’re going to find yourself shouldering more responsibility than you were prepared to take on. And if you’re like a lot of folks, you realize that it’s just as much work to come up with a backup plan as it is to do it yourself, and so you end up just doing things yourself because in the long run, it’s less stressful!

“Oh geez. The preacher’s stepping on our toes this morning!” No. As my old clergy mentor Jack Musick used to say, “If the preacher’s steppin’ on your toes, just say ‘ouch’ and move on. It may not even be about you.” And that’s true. I’m just passing on information based on what I’ve been reading lately! I was reading another article about the current job market and how flakiness is causing problems for human resource departments. A job will come open, people will apply, HR will schedule interviews and believe it or not, some people don’t even show up for the interview. They don’t bother to contact the company that set up the interview to say, “Hey, I found another job” or, “Sorry I don’t think this will work out.” There are even folks who don’t show up on the first day of work for the same reasons which puts the company in a bind because they counted on that person to be there to stay in business!

So what *drives* “flakiness?” Why has it become such a problem? Maybe it’s because we live in an increasingly noisy, busy, over-connected world where we face infinite possibilities about how we could spend our time. Societal norms have certainly changed. Anymore, when you send out an invitation to an event and request an RSVP, you can expect that half of the folks who said, “Yes, I’ll be there” will bail. That’s just the new statistical norm. Yes, we get it. We’re busy and we have a lot of options for how to spend our time. But while a packed schedule explains *why* we can’t attend everything we’re invited to, it doesn’t always explain why we *say we will and then ... don’t*.

Luo’s theory is that flakiness is rooted in dishonesty with ourselves and others about what *matters* to us. See, it’s not that we’re malicious; it’s that we’re aspirational. And while that doesn’t excuse flakiness, it might explain why it’s so common. Think about it: At any given point in time, there are countless versions of our lives that we can see for ourselves. Countless possibilities. Countless options. And it’s not that we’re not committed, it’s that we’re committed to *maintaining that optionality*. We *could* be a person who has that hobby or goes to that event or has that friend or who volunteers for that charity. We *have* those options, and we expect they’ll always be there. But inevitably, we make choices, and slowly over time, the choices we *have* made, not the choices that we *could* make, are what decide who we are. Playwright and director Woody Allen on occasion has said, “Ninety percent of success is just showing up.” Well, if that’s the case, and I believe it is, we’ve got some serious problems to address in our culture, especially if folks aren’t even showing up to job interviews!

Two stories from the Bible come to mind when I think about the value of “showing up.” Both of them involve prophets. The first is from the passage the Peggy read from Jeremiah. Somewhere in the neighborhood of 626 BC, God was looking for someone to deliver a warning to the people of Israel – “Since you’ve abandoned God, don’t be surprised if something happens where it seems like God has abandoned you.” Not a popular message considering Israel fell into the habit of worshipping

idols instead of the God who they promised would be their only God. God had someone specific in mind for this job too. God sent out a call to a young prophet named Jeremiah. And when I say “young,” I’m talking about someone still in his teens. God told Jeremiah that even while he was in his mother’s womb God knew he’d be the one to deliver God’s message. No pressure, right? The nation of Judah was falling apart. A selfish and corrupt king named Manasseh was on the throne just letting Judah fall apart. And Judah’s enemies were *watching* everything fall apart and they were lining up to see who was going to add this little kingdom to their expanding empires. Jeremiah’s response? “Yeah, but I’m just a kid!” Ever hear that one before? If anyone has ever been on a search committee to find volunteers, you’ve probably heard some version of the “Yeah, but” excuse. But God prepped Jeremiah by giving him a game plan and a script. So Jeremiah reluctantly agreed, then went to the leaders of both Judah and the northern Kingdom of Samaria and called them out on their idolatry and warned them that if they didn’t turn back to God, they’d face famine and would be eventually be plundered and taken captive by foreigners who would exile them to a strange land.

How do you think his message was received? Well, he was threatened, persecuted, and ignored and eventually Babylon closed in, destroyed the Jerusalem temple and took the leaders to their capitol. So when you get right down to it, Jeremiah’s mission failed. Even with a game plan and a script. He spent forty years of his life preaching to people who wouldn’t listen to him and who ended up in the very trouble that Jeremiah warned them about. And what’s sad is that God pretty much told Jeremiah that this was going to happen. But you know what? He showed up! He didn’t flake out even though he knew the outcome. Could you imagine being the chair of a nominating committee trying to round up volunteers with this kind of sales pitch: “You’re going to fail! But do it anyway because it’s the right thing to do.” But again, you’ve got to give Jeremiah credit - - He showed up! Even when he was dragged off to Babylon with the rest of the movers and shakers, he still

kept preaching, even though he faced more persecution and resistance. His ministry did not end well, but he was faithful. He showed up.

Then there was the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah was already a working prophet when God called him to a very specific mission. God used a different approach this time. Instead of saying to Isaiah, “You’re the one I want,” God said, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” This is the approach that a lot of churches and non-profits take. The person in charge of rounding up volunteers just goes out and says, “Hey, we need people! Who is willing?” which usually doesn’t work. But in this case, the unusual occurred. Isaiah came along and said what is music to every volunteer coordinator’s ears: “Here I am! Send me!” Now can you imagine what would have happened if God said, “Okay, then I need you and your son to go out to meet Ahaz, at the end of the conduit of the upper pool on the highway to the Fuller’s Field and deliver a *really* important message. Can you do that?” “Yup! I said, ‘Here I am!’ right?” And the next day Ahaz is out on the road waiting for Isaiah, and Isaiah never shows up. God says, “Isaiah! Where the heck were you?” “Oh, I accidentally double-booked myself today. I forgot about the seafood festival over in Ashkelon that I go to every year. Oops!” But that didn’t happen. Why? Because Isaiah showed up.

I’m not going to turn this into a shame-fest and say we all need to get our acts together and show up (although I’m sure that the nominating committee chair might not mind if I did that). I am, however, going to tell you that the effectiveness of First Christian Church’s ministry and mission locally, regionally, and globally depends on folks like Jeremiah and Isaiah who understand the importance of showing up. Remember, that’s ninety-percent of the battle right there. Trust that God will lead and direct you to where you’re needed most. And then show up!