

“Revelation Through Reading”

I gave a little rundown on what I did over my Sabbatical for the Fun Timers the other day at their focus luncheon. I’ve had some folks ask me, “So when are you going to get around to telling the rest of us about what you did on Sabbatical?” Well, I’ll tell you right now ... I’m not going to be able to share everything I learned during Sabbatical in 15 minutes. I was gone for the equivalent of a semester. My contract says I’ve got to stay around for a year after I get back, so I figure I’ve got *at least* 52 weeks to give you little snippets of what I learned. And please understand that when I say, “What I learned,” I’m not talking about “theoretical, conceptual, strategical, bore-you-to-tears kind of things.” I’m talking about burning bush, blinded-on-the-road-to-Damascus, St. John in a cave tripping out on visions, “ah-hah” God moments that caused me stop and say, “WOW!” We are talking revelatory moments here!

So let’s start with the revelation I received through my Sabbatical reading. See, I don’t read nearly as much as I should or even want to for that matter. Sometimes I feel like I just do enough reading to get what I need to put a sermon together or prepare for a presentation or a class. But that’s about it. Part of my problem is that I’m a distracted reader which, unfortunately, makes me a slow reader. See, when I read, my mind takes little *detours*, and I start ruminating about all the stuff I think I’m neglecting. So as I read, my brain is saying, “I really should be working on such-and-such,” or “I really should be visiting so-and-so,” and then when my mind snaps back to what I’m doing, I realize that even though I “read” two pages, I have no idea what I just read because my mind was so focused on these other things. So then I have to turn back 2 pages to get back on track. Anyone else do that too? Mary’s not like this. In fact, if we buy a book that we both want to read, the rule is she *always* gets it first because she says, “It takes you forever to get through a book!”

But when I'm not distracted? I *burn* through books! In the July newsletter, I shared a list of books that I planned to read over the summer. Yeah ... I burned through that pile so fast I had to gather some more. Okay, a lot more. I've got to confess ... I made some very deliberate choices on how I scheduled my time so that I could read more. When I drive, I normally listen to news-related podcasts. They usually end up putting me in a foul mood, so instead of listening to podcasts, I listened to audio books instead. I had no clue what was going on in the rest of the world news-wise, but hey ... I listened to some great books! Here's something that will shock you: I only watched three movies at the movie theater, and probably only three or four on video or Netflix. I don't watch television anyway so that wasn't an issue. So here I was ... away from home ... away from distractions ... in the great outdoors with a stack of books and my nifty portable hammock. I read more books in nine weeks than I did in probably the last two years. And I didn't find myself having to re-read pages because my mind was actually focused on reading! Maybe I fell asleep a few times because that portable hammock is pretty comfy, but hey ... I was fully present in the moment which is better than I usually do.

Here's what I ended up reading: Two history books ... one American history, one world-church history. Three books about Jesus (one being a fictional book about his childhood written by an author who is more famous for her books on vampires.) Three memoirs about people who grew up poor and became successful ... one by a female standup comedian, one by a relatively liberal black guy and one by a relatively conservative white guy. I read another memoir about a famous psychiatrist who struggles with her own mental illness. There were two books by contemporary theologians. One fifty-two week devotional book that was so good I blitzed the whole thing in about two days. I read seven works of fiction (three which were written by John Grisham!) One book about biblical interpretation. Two books on clergy self-care. Five graphic novels (that's a sophisticated term for "really big comic books" if you didn't know). Plus two re-reads of books I've read before ... *The Shack* because it was referenced in two other books on my

original reading list and Robin Meyer's *The Underground Church* because I was (of course) too distracted when I read it last winter. There was really no rhyme or reason as to why I chose these books. Some were recommended by friends and colleagues some I read because I heard or read an interview with the author in some article or a podcast I listened to before Sabbatical. But here's the big revelatory moment though ... the "God-wink" that made me say, "Whoaaah!"

In every one of these books ... and I'm talking *every* one ... even the comic books ... errr "graphic novels" ... there was a consistent theme: "By avoiding discomfort or pain, we often make things harder for ourselves than if we simply found a healthy way to face the pain." Every author addressed this issue in some way, shape, or form. Some were more subtle than others. In the books that dealt with matters of faith and faith communities, it looked like this:

- 1.) We were meant to be in relationship with God and with each other.
- 2.) Relationships are messy and require hard work.
- 3.) We'd rather avoid the mess and hard work which causes us to shut people and, consequently God, out.

Here's what this means on an individual level: Whenever we run into a situation that challenges our prejudices or assumptions about others' motives or values or culture or whatever it might be, we tend to just pack up our gear, create our own little "island of one" and shut everyone out. On a collective or corporate level we tend to create systems, standards, and rules that exclude whoever or whatever we don't like. So rather than make an effort to understand "the other," we make sure there are plenty of structures in place that clearly define who is "in" and who is "out." Or as Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *Between the World and Me*, "We name the hated strangers and are thus confirmed in the tribe." And that may work for awhile, but then as time goes on and our human-made structures start to collapse ... as we find ourselves failing to live in relationship with others and God. So we actually end up creating more work and drama for ourselves than we can imagine! And because we

can't get our heads wrapped around the idea that God wants to be in relationship with us and expects us to model that kind of a relationship with others, we end up creating some really warped and twisted images of God.

One of these images is that of the angry, wrathful "god" who just can't wait to punish us for our transgressions. With that, we've come up with this weird idea that somehow Jesus is this benevolent, heroic "good kid" sibling who comes along to take the whippin' meant for us from this angry, rage-a-holic dad-god. Think about it! Sometimes we talk about God and Jesus as if they were somehow this "good cop/bad cop" team. "Oh, the God of the Old Testament is all about the 'stick,' but you know the God of the New Testament is all about the carrot!" As if somehow we're talking about two different Gods! Tripp Fuller in his book, *Jesus: Lord, Liar, Lunatic, or Awesome* writes about how whenever we think of God as one full of hate, judgment, and anger, we need to think about Jesus on the cross who said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Fuller writes, "If that's the mystery being revealed, then any image of God needs to match it or you should ditch it. God has to be at least as nice as Jesus. If not, we're ignoring the most important part!"

But to be honest? It's a lot easier to follow a stern, rules-driven God than a God who actively seeks to be in relationship with us and who in turn desires that we be in relationship with others. We'd rather just follow rules or come up with religious rituals so we can check them off our list of duties rather than actively engage in a relationship with a God who calls us to love others as God loves us.

So ... what are we to do then? Well ... first of all, we've got to have a mutual understanding of why we're here. And believe me, I know we're all here for a myriad of different reasons. And that's okay. But I'd like to believe that *one* of the reasons we're here is that we believe that the story of God's people as presented in this collection of books that we call The Bible will help us establish a relationship with God who through the life, ministry, death, resurrection and ongoing presence of

Jesus through the Holy Spirit will show us how to be what God created us to be!

If you are here looking for answers in the form of lists, rules, structures, and creeds, then you're probably going to be disappointed. And to be honest with you, that's a lazy way to do religion anyway. But like I said earlier, we only *think* we're doing what's easiest by subscribing to such a black-and-white, dogmatic model of religion. Sure, it's easy at first. In fact it doesn't require a whole lot of thought or even a whole lot of creativity to put those structures in place. But down the road when those lazy choices result in broken relationships and churches become known for their enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, disputes, and dissention rather than for their love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control then you've got to stop and ask, "Where did things go wrong?" Well, things went wrong when rather than dealing with the difficult and often uncomfortable task of staying in relationship with God and others, we cut ourselves off in favor of the quick and easy fix. So yeah ... if you're here for the quick and easy fix, you'll be disappointed.

However, if you're here to be challenged ... if you're here to be stretched and to let God open you to new ways of being in relationship with the Creator as well as the Creation? Well then buckle your seatbelts because you're in for a heckuva ride. But here's one thing I do want to assure you -- Even if you're not ready for the ride? Even if you do take comfort in lists, laws, and creeds? You're still in a safe place where you are welcome, where you are loved, and where you are accepted just as you are. That's what Jesus did, and since the church is the Body of Christ on earth, that's what we're all about here at First Christian Church too. We say things like, "agree to differ, resolve to love, unite to serve," and "all means all." We affirm a "bold faith and deep love." We have all sorts of nifty little slogans that help define our ministry. Here's one I want you to add to the mix: "Come as you are, but be prepared for and open to being changed from the inside out!"