

Faith Is a Verb
Giving Up
June 5, 2022

Good morning everyone!

I'm glad you decided to join with us today as we continue in our series *Faith Is a Verb* ... which obviously isn't true. The word "faith" isn't *literally* a verb.

However, as I said last week, the reason I decided to give the series that title is because of the way most people define "faith."

I mean, if somebody asked *you* to define it, what would you say?

If you're like a lot of people – or, more accurately, like a lot of Christians – you might say "well, my faith is *what I believe in.*"

- I believe in God
- I believe in Jesus
- I believe the Bible is God's Word.
- And so on and so forth.

“That’s my faith. My faith is what I believe in.”

Or you might say “faith is my *trust in God*.”

Specifically, it’s ...

- Trust that God loves me.
- Trust that He will save me from my sins because of what Jesus did for me on the cross.
- Trust that He will make a way where there seems to be no way.

- Trust that He will work all things together for my good – even the worst things – because I love him.

And both of those would be very good definitions of faith *as a noun*.

But there's another kind of faith which isn't "top of mind" for most people. It's not the definition that most people – even Christians – would give.

As we put it last Sunday ...

Faith is what moves us to *do* what God wants – maybe even something great and unimaginable – because we believe He is leading us and will empower us.

... which is why I say that faith, in addition to being a noun, is also a verb.

"Faith as a noun" trusts that God will "make a way where ain't no way" (to quote the song we

sang a few minutes ago).

“Faith as a verb” actually *walks* in the way that God makes – even when it’s not the way we would have chosen.

So, in this series, we’re focusing on that particular kind of faith because ...

- a. Most people – Christian or not – don’t think of it that way
- b. Because most people – specifically Christians – miss out on a huge part of what it means to experience the power and presence of God in our lives.

And I don’t want you – or me – to miss out on that.

Now, in my experience – and, by that, I mean throughout my entire life but especially what I’ve been going through for the past six to 12

months (and I'll say more about that later) ...

In my experience – and also in the experience of other followers of Jesus as well as some of the most amazing people whose stories are recorded for us in the Bible ...

And, by the way, when I say that they are “amazing” I don't mean that they were perfect and had it all figured out.

In fact, it was just the opposite. They were messed up sinners just like you and me.

What made them amazing was that ...

- They believed God was leading them and would empower them
- So, they did something they never thought they could do – they walked in the way God made even though it wasn't the way they would have chosen.

Anyway, as I was saying ...

In my experience and in theirs, there are five practical aspects of “faith as a verb”; five ways this kind of faith can affect our lives.

The first of those impacts we looked at last week which was ...

“Choosing crazy” – doing what God asks you to do, even if it doesn’t make sense to you or anyone else.

“Crazy John”

And to illustrate this particular action, we started looking at the story of John the Baptist, who is a very prominent figure in the story of Jesus of Nazareth – at least at the beginning.

And the reason he’s so prominent is that, according to all of the eyewitnesses to the story

of Jesus (and even Jesus himself) ...

John is the one who fulfills the vision of the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah, who declared that just before the coming of the Messiah there would be “a voice crying in the wilderness ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’”

And John was that voice.

And not only was he that voice, while he was still in his mother’s womb *an angel appeared to his parents* (in the same way that an angel appeared to Mary and Joseph), telling them that their son was going to be that voice.

So, from a very early age, I think it’s likely that John knew his calling. I think his parents told him.

But what they didn’t – and couldn’t – tell him, and what John didn’t know was the kind of crazy his calling would involve.

I don't think John knew as a boy or a teenager or a young man that being "the voice crying in the wilderness" meant literally *living* in the wilderness – being a desert-dweller about 20 miles northeast of Jerusalem.

I don't think he knew it meant ...

- Dressing in clothes made of camel's hair
- Surviving on locusts and wild honey
- And not only preaching "repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand" but regularly insulting the religious leaders of his day who came out to "inspect" his ministry.

I don't think John fully understood the crazy his calling would involve until the day when, as Luke put it, "a message of God came to him."

Whether God literally spoke, or John had a

dream or some kind of an impression – a thought that wouldn't go away, we don't know because John never told anyone.

Regardless of how it happened, it was enough for John to realize, “the time is now. It's time to move to the desert and be the voice.”

And I think because he was a human being like the rest of us ...

- He first had to wrestle with it.
- And then he had to *choose* “crazy.”

He had to consciously decide to walk down a path that made very little sense compared to what everyone else around him was doing.

And, in last week's message, I talked about how those of us who believe in and follow Jesus *should expect* to have that same kind of experience from time to time, where ...

- A “message from God” comes to us ...
- Asking us to do something – maybe even something great, something unimaginable – that we never imaged ourselves doing, to climb a mountain we never imagined climbing ...
- With the promise that He will lead and empower us, just like He did all those amazing people we read about in the scripture.

And when that message comes, just like them we will have to decide.

- Are we going to play it safe?
- Or are we going to choose crazy?

And if you missed last week’s message, I encourage you to go the media section of our

app or our website and check it out.

“Decreasing John”

So, John chose crazy.

And there he was, day after day ...

- Out in the wilderness by the Jordan River
- Preaching about the coming Kingdom of God
- And baptizing the thousands of men and women from all walks of life who had heard what he was doing and wanted to be part of what God was *about to do*.

It was “crazy” at its finest.

And then one day, *the craziest thing of all* happened.

All four Gospels – all four recollections of the eyewitnesses of Jesus’ life – tell the story, which is very unusual.

Typically, stories will show up in two or three with each author including some details that the others leave out.

But this event is so incredible that all four include it.

Here’s how Matthew tells it.

Jesus came from Galilee ...

... which way up north where he was from ...

... to the Jordan ...

... which was way down south, east of Jerusalem

...

... to be baptized by John.

Now, that's crazy.

Why would the one for whom John is preparing the way need to be baptized "as evidence of repentance" like all the others?

That's literally the question that came to John.

Matthew writes ...

John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

"I don't get it. Seems crazy."

Jesus replied ...

"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness."

Then John consented.

Matthew 3:13-15 (NLT)

John said “OK” and then dunked Jesus under the water just like everyone else.

But *unlike* everyone else John had baptized, something crazy happened next.

Matthew writes that ...

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water.

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him.

*And a voice from heaven said,
“This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.”
Matthew 3:15-17 (NLT)*

Wow!

Now, there’s a whole lot we could talk about in

this passage ...

- There's John's question: why did Jesus – the Messiah – ask to be baptized? Was it really necessary?
- Then, there's the question of what actually happened, like “did Jesus just come up out of the water when John pulled him up? Or did he literally come *up* out of the water, as in hanging in mid-air levitation?”

But we're not going there today.

Instead, what we're going to focus on is what happens *to John*.

Think of what it must have been like to have been in his sandals that day.

For however long – years maybe – he'd been out in the wilderness doing the crazy thing God had

led and empowered him to do. And now, what he'd been preaching about had become *real*.

If there was ever a point where John was at the apex – the absolute peak – of his ministry, this had to be it.

It would be like one of those preachers who predict the end of the world on a certain date and then it actually happens.

Of course, in that case, no one would be around to congratulate them for being right ... because *it really was* the end of the world!

But, in John's case, it wasn't *the end* of the world. It was the *beginning* of a new thing God was doing *in* the world.

And John had been right. And everybody knew it or was going to know it.

It was a huge day for him.

And I'm sure there were people close to John – his disciples, men and women who had committed to stay in the desert and help him ...

There were people who congratulated John and celebrated with John.

But the *next* day – the day *after* that crazy and incredible day ...

... according to one of Jesus' best friends, John the Apostle (who, to be clear, isn't the same person as John the Baptist) ...

John the Apostle tells us that ...

The following day John was again standing with two of his disciples.

He doesn't say where they're standing or what they're talking about. But it's not hard to

imagine them reliving what had happened the day before.

And, lo and behold, as they're standing there talking, Jesus walks by!

And as Jesus walked by ...

*John looked at him and declared,
"Look! There is the Lamb of
God!" John 1:35-36 (NLT)*

... which was John's way of saying that Jesus would one day become the ultimate sacrificial lamb who would die for the sins of the world, for your sins and my sins.

So, John and a couple of his guys are standing there and Jesus walks by.

And *then* ... something that will test John's faith for the rest of his life.

*When John's two disciples heard
this ...*

When John pointed at Jesus and said, "there he
is again!"

*... they ... followed ... Jesus. John
1:37 (NLT)*

As in "see ya, John. Been good to know ya, John.
Been great to serve with ya, John."

*Andrew, Simon Peter's brother,
was one of these men who heard
what John said and then
followed Jesus. Andrew went to
find his brother, Simon, and told
him, "We have found the
Messiah."*

*Then Andrew brought Simon to
meet Jesus. John 1:40-41 (NLT)*

So, you see what's happening here?

Less than 24 hours after his finest moment, key members of John's inner circle are leaving him to go and follow Jesus.

Even worse (it seems), they're encouraging others to come *with* them and follow Jesus *instead of John*.

And those "others" do come and follow. *Multitudes* of others.

So many, in fact, that several months later, some of John's remaining disciples come to him with what they expect will be distressing news.

"John, we hate to break it to you ... "

"John, we hate to be the ones to tell you this ..."

But ...

"The man you met on the other side of the Jordan River, the one

you identified as the Messiah, is also baptizing people.

“And everybody is going to him instead of coming to us.” John 3:26 (NLT)

John’s remaining disciples can see the writing on the wall.

- The crowds, which had been getting smaller, would continue to get smaller.
- Contributions to John’s ministry, which had been down, were going to keep going down.
- John was losing the spotlight and the notoriety.
- Even the negative attention from the religious leaders was fading. They’re much more intent in quashing Jesus and his movement than John’s.

Bottom line, John is old news.

But it gets even worse, according to John's disciples.

"They're baptizing people over there, but they don't do it like you do."ⁱ

"In fact, we heard that Jesus eats and drinks with tax collectors and other sinners *even before* they repent."

"All this work you've done John, and now this is happening. It just doesn't seem right."

"After all, this guy wouldn't even be on the map if it wasn't for you – and, of course, *us* because we've been helping you."

John's disciples were clearly jealous.

So, what is John going to say in response to all of

that?

Let me give you a hint: he's going to say something that sounds very spiritual and very mature ... *because it is.*

But don't let that fool you because John is going to struggle with this for the rest of his life.

This is not a one and done decision for him, which will become very obvious in next week's message.

Here's what he says in response.

*"No one can receive anything
unless God gives it from heaven."*

John 3:27 (NLT)

In other words, "if that's what's happening to Jesus and his ministry, then that must be what God wants to happen."

Now, be careful with generalizing that statement because it's not always true. Not everything that happens in this world is what God wants to happen.

John is specifically talking about *ministry* – about Jesus doing what the Father told him to do.

And if Jesus is doing what the Father told him to do, John says, what's happening as a result must be what God wants to happen.

John continues:

“You yourselves know how plainly I told you, ‘I am not the Messiah. I am only here to prepare the way for him.’” John 3:28 (NLT)

“I never expected to be anything more than that.”

And then he gives this great analogy.

“It is the bridegroom who marries the bride, and the bridegroom’s friend – the best man – is simply glad to stand with him and hear his vows.”

“I’m the best man in this deal.”

“Therefore, I am filled with joy at his success.” John 3:29 (NLT)

“I’m not *jealous* of Jesus. I’m *happy* for him.”

And then the kicker, the part that is going to challenge John and his disciples for the rest of their lives.

John says:

“He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less.” John 3:30 (NLT)

Or, as some other translations put it: “He must increase. I must decrease.”

“Guys, the downward trend we’re seeing is going to continue. And *that’s how it ought to be*. That’s how it’s *meant* to be.”

- “I’ve prepared the way, now I need to get out of the way.”
- “I have to *give up* so that He can *go up*.”
- “I have to let go of my power, my position, and my prestige.”

Wow!

It would take a lot of faith to be able to say that and then do it ... which is why this is another very practical application of “faith as a verb.”

Not only does God sometimes ask us to “choose

crazy.”

Sometimes God asks us to give up – to sacrifice ourselves – so that someone else can “go up.”

Getting Personal

Of course, if you’re not a Christian and you’re listening to this story and to John’s experience, you’re probably thinking, “Rick, you make it sound like that’s an issue only for people of faith. But it’s not.”

“At some point – and maybe multiple points – *everyone*, Christian or not, will have to ‘give up’ so that someone else can ‘go up.’”

“At some point, pretty much all of us will be called on to decrease so that someone else can increase.”

And that’s true. This is not exclusively “a spiritual issue.”

For example, if you own a business, at some point you'll have to turn it over to someone else.

And the only way it will work ... the only way that "someone else" will be able to *go up* to be who they need to be as a leader ... is for you to *give up* your power, your position, and your prestige.

It's the only way.

Same thing is true if you have kids.

The past few days, Jetta and I were over in Hannibal babysitting while our youngest daughter Janelle and her husband Ben were out of town.

Check it out – that's me being "grandpa."

It was very interesting being there without anyone else, just us and the boy.

Looking around their house, taking it all in, seeing the life they have built together, it was so clear that Janelle (our baby!) really is a capable and mature adult.

But there was a time – many years, in fact – when *we* called the shots in her life. “It” – whatever it was – didn’t happen without our involvement and approval.

But eventually, we had to decrease so that she could increase. In fact, she *couldn't* increase without us decreasing.

We had to *choose* to give up – little by little – some of our power, position and prestige ... and then, at some point, *all of it*, when she married Ben.

And while that was a cause for rejoicing, it was also a little painful and, to be honest, scary. Ben’s a great guy but, that’s our baby!

So, again, “giving up” so someone else can “go up” is just what life sometimes forces you to do.

But sometimes – as in the case of John the Baptist – giving up so someone else can go up *is what God asks you to do.*

For example, when Jason Davis and I began talking back in January ...

... and for those of you who don't know, Jason is lead pastor of Hope Church KC.

When he and I (through what can only be described as an instance of Divine Providence) began talking back in January about the possibility of merging our two churches ...

... and for those of you who aren't aware of that, you can find more information on the merger page of our website. Just click the banner across the top.

When Jason and I began talking back in January and it became apparent to both of us that God might be leading us to do something crazy ...

I realized that those words of John the Baptist – “he must increase, I must decrease” – would apply to me, personally.

And to be completely honest with you, I didn't like it.

I've known for several years that my time as the lead pastor here needs to come to an end – that, at some point “down the road,” I will need to give up so that someone else can go up.

But every time I've thought about it and talked about it with you all in a message, it's always been a vague generality, an unknown person at an unknown time who would sit in my seat on the bus; the seat I've sat in for the past 28 years since we launched the church in 1994.

And now, that person (potentially) was looking

at me eye-to-eye across the table and, if this was going to work, we would need to define a timeline, and the clock would start ticking.

By the end of year three, assuming this merger takes place, Jason would change seats with me. He would move from the role of Executive Pastor to Lead Pastor, and vice versa from me.

He must increase, I must decrease.

In fact, the more I thought about this and prayed about it, the more I've sensed God saying that if this happens, my number one job over the next five years will be to do everything I can to help Jason succeed.

And I know that sounds so mature and so spiritual and it is at some level. I don't think I could have done this kind of thing five years ago.

But literally giving up the power and position and prestige of being the lead pastor – not being

the primary vision caster and value holder and spiritual leader?

That's hard because I really enjoy it. I was made for it. And I'm pretty good at it.

And while I'm sure Jason is also good at it – he has to be, he started a new church which survived being shut down during COVID ...

Even though Jason is a great leader in his own right, he won't do it the same way I do it. And that's going to bug me and maybe even some of you.

But even before we get to that point, if this merger happens, I'm going to be giving up stage time, speaking time, right away.

- In the first year, Jason will speak at least a third of the Sundays.

- In the second year, he'll speak at least 40% of the time.
- In the third year, it'll be 50-50.
- And it will continue to go up after that.

He must increase, I must decrease. Literally.

And he's a good speaker. But so am I. And I enjoy it. A lot.

But for him to go up, I have to give up.

And by the way, if we merge, Jason will have to give up these things, too.

He launched a church from scratch, just like I did which means, at his church, he sits in the same seat I sit in. He's the point person, the primary speaker and vision caster and value holder.

And he has to decrease not so that *I* can increase but so that *the new church* that will be formed by the merger can increase.

And that's what this really is, and we need to remember that.

God has made it very clear that what we're talking about is not "Hope Church joining NHCC and creating North Heartland 3.0."

We're not talking about an acquisition where the big fish (NHCC) just kind of swallows up and assimilates the smaller fish (Hope Church).

We're talking about creating a new thing made up of the best of us and the best of them.

Anyway ...

As Jason and I added more and more people to the circle to discuss what the crazy thing we thought God might be doing, I realized that the

idea of “giving up” and “sacrifice” was going apply to *all of us* in some way.

Actually, the words that came to me were the words of Jesus.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

“For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”

Matthew 16:24-25 (NIV)

I remember the first time Jetta and Mica and I met with Jason’s elders.

As I listened to their story and how much their church meant to them and how much they would have to give up in order to do this crazy thing, it hit me – and I actually said it out loud ...

“For this to work, everyone – not just me and

not just Jason – is going to have to die to themselves in some way. Every person is going to have to let go of something they’re holding on to right now.”

So, let’s talk about that for this church, North Heartland.

If the merger happens, for it to work, every person who calls this church “home” will need to give up <something> so that the new church can “go up” ...

So that the new church can be successful.

So that it can be a better servant of God and this community than either church could be by itself.

Every single one of us will need to die to ourselves – what we like, what we want, what we’re used to – in some way.

As I’ve thought about it and talked with many of you, I think we’re going to have to let go of at

least three things and maybe four depending on your level of involvement.

The first two are fairly easy.

1. You might have to give up your seat.

The first week of the new church, July 17th if this happens, someone from Hope Church might be sitting there. And you'll have to move.

No big deal. At least it shouldn't be.

For the new church to go up, you'll need to give up ...

2. Hearing Rick speak every week.

That should be easy, right?

Actually, a lot of you have said "but what if I don't like Jason?"

Let me assure you, we – myself, our pastors and advisory council – wouldn't be talking to Jason and thinking about this if we didn't think Jason "fit" our church and could do a great job as a speaker.

If it helps, several folks who've listened to him have said, "he's like a younger version of Rick."

So, those first two are easy. The next two are not.

For the new church to go up, we'll all need to give up ...

3. Our name.

"Will people know who we are anymore?"

Maybe even "Will people think our big church died and this small church took over?"

Finally, for the new church to go up, some of us

will need to give up ...

4. Our position ... our seat on the bus (so to speak).

And that begins with me ... and Jason, too, on day one.

But it's going to affect some of you as well.

As we merge our volunteer teams with volunteer teams from Hope Church, it might be that you – or one of them – don't end up in the same seat you're in right now.

We're committed to finding a place for everyone who wants to serve but there's no guarantee that you'll be doing what you're currently doing as a volunteer.

If I hear one more word about “this is just about getting rid of old people” *you* might hear a preacher cuss.

We're not getting rid of old people. I'm an "old people" and we're not getting rid of me. I'm just going to move over a bit to make room for someone else ...

... not because I'm unwanted but because there is a time for every believer where God says, "I want you to give up so that someone else can go up."

And I think that time is now for me.

And I – and our pastors and our council – think that time is now for us, collectively, as a church.

But, as I've said so many times, I'm not infallible. Our pastors are not. Our council is not.

And because a merger is going to require all of us to die to ourselves in some way, I don't want us doing it if God is not leading us.

This is why our discernment process matters so much. This is why, if this is your church, I need you to engage in the process.

We need everyone who calls NHCC home to go before God and follow the process.

I'll say more about that at the end of the service ... which we need to get to because my time is up.

So, let's wrap it up.

Conclusion

And I know some of you are guests today and some of you aren't Christians, so I appreciate your patience while we dealt with some family business.

Hopefully, it gives you some insight on who we are and on what faith as a verb looks like in real

life.

It's scary and sometimes no fun but Jesus says that it's the way to life.

But here's the thing. He's not asking us to do anything he himself has not already done.

We serve a King who has done exactly what He is telling us to do.

In one of his letters, the Apostle Paul put it like this:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges. He took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. Philippians 2:5-7 (NIV)

Endnotes

ⁱ John 3:25 mentions an argument concerning baptism between some of John's disciples and "a certain Jew" who is unnamed. Based on the very next verse (v26), I believe this has to be Jesus or at the very least one of his disciples.