

JUMP
First Sunday of Christmas - December 30, 2007
By Rev. Cindy Campbell

Today is the first Sunday of Christmas. That sounds odd but actually, we were in the Advent Season until Christmas Day. If you are like me and put up your Christmas tree over the Thanksgiving break, it is time to reclaim your living room and begin thinking of summer vacation. I packed up my Christmas decorations on Friday and started looking at the gardening catalogs that came in the mail. Excuse me, I am getting a little nostalgic for the smell of chlorine and suntan lotion, already. Those smells remind me of a day late last summer.

I was watching some kids play at the neighborhood swimming pool when I took my son. He and other children were playing at the dock in the middle of the pool. This pool is more like a big concrete pond with a sandy beach around it than just a neighborhood pool. There are slides, rope swings, and a lumberjack log thing that kids can attempt to walk on adjacent to a dock. It was then that I began thinking about this sermon and the scripture.

You see, I think that the pool is a good metaphor for the Christian life. The goal is to JUMP into the pool, swim out to the dock, pull oneself up onto the dock, JUMP over a couple of obstacles to get to the log, and then proceed to cross the log.

I watched a kid after kid JUMP from the dock on to the lily pad only to knock someone else off the lily pad. After each splash, I would hear the lifeguard call over the megaphone, "One at a time on the lily pad!"

You see, the lily pad is a floating disk anchored to the floor of the pool by a single chain in the center. JUMPING on the lily pad takes a lot of faith. Just like many things that we pursue in our Christian walk such as teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, serving on a committee etc. There are tension wires over the lily pad and the log to grab in order to stabilize your body but the shorter kids never can reach the wire. In our Christian walk, we have safety nets called Prayer, Study, and fellow Christians. The children, like us Christians, have to rely on their own wits, balance, and the mercy of the person following them to get across to the log. Sometimes in our faith, the "shorter people" are those who marginalized for some reason – income, education, new Christians, etc.

Landing on the log is its own reward but the real goal is to be able to walk across the log and JUMP in the pool from the opposite end. That is the real accomplishment but few ever make it. Negotiating around the other people on the log is one problem the kids have. Maintaining his or her own balance is another; especially when some clown on the log has a different goal: to see if he can knock everyone else off the log. The problem is that some of the obstacles that the little kids have to overcome are the bigger kids and it is the same in the Church. Sometimes those of us who know the ropes do not want to share the important information with the new folks. Some folks have agendas of their own, not the church's mission.

We in the Church are often, as Jesus pointed out in Luke, guilty of being an obstacle to someone else. Sometimes, we are the ones who jump on lily pad and knock someone else off before they make it to the log. We are the ones get in the way of others' being able to live out their faith by our selfish desires.

We can cause others to stumble by our ineptness, our faltering steps, and our lack of faith. Jesus apparently knew this would be the case and he warned the disciples about being obstacles to other believers. We have to be accountable to one another and FOR one another. We have to “Be on Our Guard,” as Jesus teaches in Luke.

We can break down this passage in Luke into four sections that speak to how we as Christians are interact with one another: Verse 1 – 2 is Life in the Community of Faith, Sometimes as Christian leaders, we find ourselves in embarrassing situations in which we demonstrate unchristian like behavior. We are all guilty of this. We have those moments that we are not proud of. We have moments that we would rather take back.

Jesus warns us when he warned the disciples that we have to be on our guard always. We have to JUMP in and be aware of how our actions, our spoken and unspoken responses affect others. We have to JUMP out of the way of others trying to see Jesus. We cannot provide more obstacles than access to a loving merciful Savior we serve.

Our job in the life of the community of faith is to make sure that we do not rock the “lily pad” when others are trying to get on it. We are to move out of their way, so that they have a clear path on to their faith walk. Sometimes we JUMP ahead, sometimes we may have to JUMP out of the way. When we humans fail to get out of way, we cause another to stumble. Then we feel badly. We would love to have a “Mulligan” – a do- over. However, the burden is on us to be always looking out for others.

Then Jesus offered GOOD NEWS to the disciples and us. He talks about Forgiveness and Repentance. What is said is said, what is done is done. However, we have to JUMP first and ask forgiveness and repent. Even our acts of contrition are seen as models for Christian behavior in community. We model the behavior we expect to see from our brothers and sisters in the community of faith. We have to JUMP in and demonstrate the same love and forgiveness that Jesus shows us to others.

Not only are we responsible for our actions, Jesus calls us to hold each other accountable. We are to call each other on shortcomings, sin. We are to JUMP in and forgive each other as often as it takes, just as the offender is to repent as much as it takes. There is always grace in repentance. As Paul tells us in Romans, “but where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”¹ The more I consider this, the more I am convinced that forgiveness is one of the most important keys to a successful Christian life. We have to forgive ourselves in order to forgive others. We have to forgive others in order to forgive ourselves. The more we practice forgiveness, the more Christ-like we are becoming.

We have to act as the lifeguard for other Christians whether they are in our congregations or our colleagues. We have to JUMP in to bring a brother or sister to the shore. It is our duty to one another and a sign of true leadership to be accountable to one another through the practices of confession and acts of forgiveness.

Jesus tells us in verses 5-6 that we have to JUMP on our faith. The apostles asked Jesus for more faith to carry out these instructions. Jesus’ response is one that requires a little digging for our contemporary times. He said to the disciples, “If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ (NRS) and it would obey you.

Jesus was not questioning whether the apostles have faith. He is not questioning our faith; so we do not have the right to question our faith. God gives our faith. This is a Greek vocab lesson. There is

something, according to theologian Fred Craddock, in the Greek language called a “conditional clause according to fact.”ⁱⁱ The Greek clause used in this passage is a conditional clause according to fact, which means Jesus was not calling into question whether the apostles had faith. He was affirming their faith and challenging them to use the little faith they had. If we used the little mustard seed sized faith we have we could move a mulberry tree with its wide root system into the sea. Matthew refers to this story and uses the illustration of moving a mountain.ⁱⁱⁱ

The quality of our faith is more important than the quantity of our faith.^{iv} We have to JUMP and use the faith we have in order to get more faith. When we say we need more faith, we are saying that we are afraid. We are using fear to make decisions instead of faith. As Christian leaders, we have to be courageous and JUMP even when it requires us to self-monitor ourselves or to hold a brother or sister accountable. As some anonymous person once prayed, "O God, I don't pray for enough faith to move mountains. I can get enough dynamite and bulldozers to do that. What I need and ask for is enough faith to move me." ^v Sometimes my feet just won't move! JUMPing is an act of faith. Get JUMPING!

Verses 7-10 are about Servant Leadership. Jesus ended his talk with the apostles that day with a reminder that we are to be servant leaders. He used the illustration of slaves and master but he is not making a social commentary. He is using an example that people in His time would understand. Here is what we need to JUMP on: We are the slaves, servants to God, our master. We are serving God by serving our brothers and sisters inside and outside our faith communities. We do our ministry because God calls us to do it. Our ministry calls for us to put others first and ourselves last.

Servant leadership takes into account how well we are able guard our own steps so that we do not cause others to falter. Servant leadership is how we are able to help a brother or sister get back on the right path. Servant leadership is how we use our little poppy (mustard) seed faith to make the impossible, even the improbable happen.

Servant leadership also means that we are satisfied when we have completed the task given us and we are not looking for accolades. We take satisfaction from a job well done not the praise of people around us. We are satisfied with our job for the Kingdom when we JUMP in and get the job done.

Out on the dock, the kids who seem to be successful on the log walk are those who make room for others on the lily pad, get out of the way of those who do not want to linger on the log. The kids who get up after falling off the log and try again are the successful ones. The kids who put others before themselves how we are to live as Christians.

I invite you this Christmas season to consider the ways that you too can JUMP in faith and know that God guides you, gives the courage to Share the Good News with those inside these walls and outside these walls.

ⁱ Romans 5:20b NIV

ⁱⁱ Craddock, Fred. Luke: Interpretation: Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching., pg. 198.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 17:20 NIV

^{iv} © 1996-2003 Chris Haslam / <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/archive/cpr27m.shtml>

^v Anonymous source quoted by Brian Stoffren. <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke17x5.htm>