

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever jumped to a wrong conclusion only to have the truth revealed at a later time? I think most of us are pretty good at catching a glimpse at some situation, and we tend to draw conclusions about what's really going on. Have you ever done that?

I'd like to tell you a story, a parable that is the basis for the preaching series for this Lent—Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear. Here's the story...

A mad scientist wanted to learn about the leaping abilities of frogs. To do so, he placed a frog on his laboratory table, stood behind the frog and shouted, "jump, frog, jump!" The frog jumped. The scientist carefully measured the distance of that first leap. He consistently repeated this procedure a number of times to provide reliable and valid statistical research. He then surgically removed one of the front legs of the frog. (*We know. It is a bizarre story. Remember, this is a mad scientist!*) Placing the frog on the table, the scientist once again stood behind him and yelled, "jump, frog, jump!" Again, responding to the noise, the frog leaped forward and the scientist carefully measured the distance.

The scientist had the frog jump with three legs a number of times to gather his scientific data. He then surgically removed another leg of the frog and repeated the experiment. He repeated each step of the experiment, measuring the ability of the frog to jump with four, then three, then two, then one leg. Finally, the scientist cut off the last leg and placed the frog on the table, stood behind the frog and yelled, "jump, frog, jump!" Not surprisingly, the frog did not leap. The scientist yelled again but there was no response. The scientist finally stomped his feet, clapped his hands, and screamed as loudly as he could, but still the frog did not move. The scientist reflected on what he had seen and contemplated the meaning of this experiment. Finally, he sat up straight in his chair, and with an excited expression on his face that disclosed his discovery of new scientific insight, he wrote down, "Frogs without legs can't hear."

This story (probably older than the hills) was told in a high school biology class. The intent of this story was to emphasize that simply having data is not enough to draw sound scientific conclusions. The tale was a caution against running wild with partial information.

Obviously the scientist in the story missed the point! He drew an erroneous conclusion because he had a poor image of what a frog is, assuming that a frog could jump without legs. This scientist apparently thought that it was enough to look like a frog to be able to jump like a frog; it was enough that the frog had a frog's head and a frog's torso. It was not necessary for the frog to have legs to be able to jump.

Today in our Gospel lesson, we heard another story...the story of Jesus' Transfiguration. It is such an odd story. Jesus took his inner circle, Peter, James, and John, to a high mountain. Jesus took them up to the top of the mountain where they had a spectacular vision. They saw Jesus transfigured before their very eyes. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling white. Then Elijah and Moses, two of the greatest Old Testament leaders appeared with Jesus. The disciples were probably pretty confused at that point. They weren't sure what it all meant.

And so Peter, jumping to conclusions wanted to capture the moment. Peter blurted out: "Let me build three houses; one for each of you." Peter wanted to hold onto this moment, he wanted to hang out with this glorifies Jesus. But Jesus has other plans. Soon a bright cloud overshadowed the disciples, and there was another voice, the voice of God. God told them: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Let me translate that for you. God told Peter and the disciples, "Don't be so quick to jump to conclusions. Be quiet! Stop talking. Slow down. Listen to Jesus for a change. He's got work to do before he embraces his glory again." You see God knew that Jesus must suffer and die before he would be raised up. Peter just wasn't ready to "get it."

Making wrong conclusions—we do it all the time! I wonder if we sometimes have reached other wrong conclusions as the body of Christ—the Church.

For instance...If I were to ask you, "What is the church?" What would you say? Just so I don't put anyone on the spot, I asked my son Isaac this question... "What is the church?" He said that church is a place where you learn about Jesus. Then I asked him if home is a church and he shook his head and said, "Mmm mmm."

Not to expect too much from a five year old, but I wonder if that what many of your think about the church—church happens in this building, in our sanctuary. Perhaps even some of you think, "If a pastor isn't there, then it really isn't church." This conclusion about what church is, if we use the frog analogy and compare the body of the church with the body of a frog, we can perceive some similarly ridiculous conclusions. The church has assumed that if the church frog has a church frog head (church leadership) and a church frog torso (publicly gathered and visible community, primarily Sunday mornings in the congregation), that it should be able to jump and move in the world. The church seems to have missed the point that to be mobile in this world and, therefore, impact the larger world, the church frog needs church frog legs.

The church is trying to leap into faithful congregational ministry for the twenty-first century without legs to propel it. Try as it might to move forward, too often the church just sits there. It seems to have lost the mobility of its legs. A body without any strength in the legs is immobile, and legs without a body have no purpose. The body and legs of the church need to come together to form a healthy, dynamic, and forward-leaping church. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be believed and passed on to the next generations, then the whole church (or whole church frog) needs to be intact.

"Church = Congregation + Home"
(frog) (head & body) (legs)

My conviction is that the church is made up of a partnership between the faith life in the home and the faith life of the congregation. *The basic building block for healthy congregational life is the home*, from where we routinely receive people into the public arena of the congregational setting. Christian faith and the life of faith are passed on from generation to generation through the coordinated efforts of the larger body working with the legs. This means that a closer relationship between home and congregation benefits both our homes and our congregations for healthier and more fulfilling faith in daily life.

I think there needs to be a transformation in how we think about passing on faith in Jesus Christ. This is the primary task of the church—to pass on faith in Jesus Christ. The central question of the church is, "Are we forming faith?" Often the church skirts around this question. Pastors, youth ministers, teachers, and congregational guides are often asked instead, "Can you help us increase our church attendance?" or, "How can we get youth and families to come to church?" But these questions miss the mark. Only 20 percent of parents feel that congregations help families form faith!

We cannot assume that what we are currently doing in our congregations is enough. Certainly church attendance and a vibrant corporate worship life are pieces of a healthy environment in which faith is formed. A healthy environment for faith formation is more complex than what takes place within the congregational walls, however. The faith life of the home is also critical. The term home for us is not merely the place where one lives and the people who live there. Rather, home is the larger network of relationships and daily life experiences of people of faith. Home is a metaphorical image to describe the intersection of faith and daily life. Parents are asking both implicitly and explicitly for their congregations to do more to help them create this healthy faith-formative environment.

The church tends to be preoccupied with what takes place within its institutional and physical walls, falsely assuming that within the congregational building, all the necessary elements are present and available for faith to be formed and flourish. Many church leaders and even everyday church members think in this way because this is the way they were raised to think. However, the Scriptures, church confessions, and church history, as well as recent research and anecdotal evidence, all show this to be a false assumption.

To understand the church primarily as a people called to a way of life 24 hours a day, seven days a week emphasizes the union of home and congregation in a vital partnership in ministry and redefines the life and work of pastors, lay professionals, and lay volunteers in the congregation, as well as godparents, grandparents, parents, and other adult caregivers in the home, neighborhood, and community. All those who see themselves as part of this church benefit from a larger, more complete experience of church as the life of the people of God in various settings.

This vision of church understands faith formation and mission to the larger world as an outgrowth of this partnership. It offers a foundational model for ministry that has been present since the beginning of the church and yet has been overlooked in our expert and professional dependent modern world; This vision of the church recalls what at times has been forgotten; that Christianity is first and foremost a lay movement supported by the trained and committed leadership of clergy and laity alike.

So, we are back to our question; "Are we forming faith?" The purpose of this preaching series is to identify the principles and practices that are faith formative. I will be presenting Five Principles on Sunday mornings of Lent and on the Wednesday night midweek services, we'll take a look at the Four Key faith practices.

THE FIVE PRINCIPLES ARE:

1. Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships, often in our own homes.
2. The church is a living partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the ministry of the home.
3. Where Christ is present in faith, the home is church, too.
4. Faith is caught more than it is taught.
5. If we want Christian children and youth, we need Christian adults and parents.

THE FOUR KEYS ARE:

1. Caring conversation
2. Devotions
3. Service
4. Rituals and traditions

Working through these Five Principles, Four Key faith practices, and three characteristics, the Holy Spirit creates passionate and faithful evangelists and disciples.

ENDNOTE About the definition of “family”

Please note that when I am talking about family, I am using this word inclusively, not exclusively. The Bible uses a number of terms that are equated with our modern word for family. The Old Testament uses terms that equate family with extended domestic relationships, clan, tribe, and even the entire nation of Israel. The New Testament term for family may also be translated as "household" and would include extended family relationships as well as slaves and other workers in the economic life of the home.

I'd like to use the term “family” in this larger, more inclusive sense as a way to convey the immediate, personal, and trusted relationships that sustain people in life. As such, "family" includes not only two parents with children, but other configurations including single adults, single-parent families, multi-generational families, adoptive families, groups of friends, and various non—traditional configurations as well. Further, family includes the community of faith.

One consequence of this perspective of family is that every Christian adult is included under the category of Christian parent. All Christian adults are needed to support the parental activity of raising Christian children in the faith. A basic faith bond exists between Christian adults and children that fosters a filial relationship between them. Martin Luther considered this cross-generational bond between all Christian adults and children to be an essential requirement for faith formation and socialization. He stated, "...all who are called as masters stand in the place of parents and must derive from them their power and authority to govern." "Masters" are Christian adults who join with parents in the vital work of raising children.