



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker
January 6 2019 Sermon

Faithful in Very Little Just Show Up

Scripture Lessons: Luke: 16:10-13

At the beginning of every year, they came. The folks from student life, that is. Came to talk to the new students about “Achieving Academic Success.” With their time-management systems, note-taking strategies, schedules for academic, peer, and career advising, counseling centers and hot-line numbers, and what-to-do-when-you-can’t-stand-your-roommate advice—they came. When they left, I would turn to the students and say, “Just show up,” and go on teaching.

Look, I didn’t mean to throw shade on all their stuff, it has some value, it can be useful, it can help—at least it can’t hurt if the students stick with it. But really, in my experience, the first and most essential step for achieving academic success—or any other kind of success for that matter—is just showing up. There are other steps—doing your homework, for example, that helps, having a teachable spirit, that’s important, very important—and we can talk about those, we can work on those—but showing up, that’s first, that’s essential.

At the beginning of every year, they come. The folks who want to tell us how to live better lives in the new year. With their new high protein, no-sugar Mediterranean or DASH, volumetrics or flexitarian diets, with their seven smart strategies for financial wellness, with their “HIIT” (H-I-I-T: that’s high intensity interval training), and their orange theory (or yellow theory or whatever color theory) workouts, with their miracle makeovers and twelve tips for better relationships and a better, healthier, new you in the new year—they come.

And to all of which I want to say the same thing: just show up. Oh yes, yes, all their stuff has some value, it can be useful, it can help—at least it can’t hurt if you stick with it. But really, in my experience, the first and most essential step for achieving success in the new year—or any other time of year for that matter—is just showing up. There are other steps—effort, discipline—and we can talk about those, we can work on those—but showing up, that’s first, that’s essential.

My students always had this idea that academic success depends on some mysterious, innate, God-given quality, which they called “being smart,” or “being really smart,”—as in “she’s *really* smart.” With the assumption that this quality is best identified by standardized testing, and also with the deep-seated, often unarticulated anxiety, that they really didn’t have it, and if they had been thought to have it up to this point, they would soon enough be exposed for the posers they truly were.

So the student would be in my office, having just missed two or three straight weeks of classes, saying, “Dr. Baker, I’m just not very good at this stuff, I’m just not that smart”

To which I would say: “BULL . . . LONEY! Look do do yourself a favor: just show up.”

Please understand me: I’m not saying there aren’t differences in innate abilities; different people have different gifts, we see that especially in math, music, and languages. But we also spend way too much time and energy focusing on those relatively minute differences, thereby overlooking the much larger, much more important—and much more human—gifts that we all share. We may not all be Mozart, but we can all enjoy music, we can all enjoy Mozart. And with a little effort and discipline, we can make beautiful music. So thank God for music, and for Mozart.

So maybe in 2019, I will not achieve the body of Chris Hemsworth (he’s the Australian actor who plays Thor in the movies—do you know he incorporates Muay Thai boxing moves into his workouts? Not that I pay attention to all that stuff, mind you); so maybe I will not achieve a body like his in 2019 (or any other year for that matter), but I can still move a little more, exercise a little more, and maybe with a little effort and discipline . . . but it all begins with just showing up—that’s the first and most essential step.

And it isn’t easy. It isn’t easy because of habit and inertia, because none of us can control or govern ourselves the way we’d like, because roommates and relationships get difficult, because life gets in the way, because stuff happens—I get it. We all have our struggles, the only difference being that some struggles are easier to hide and some people are better at hiding them.

But it also isn’t easy because we’re so prone to compare and despair.

Compare and despair: that is, we spend so much time comparing ourselves to those we think are more gifted—the kid who took advanced calculus in 9th-grade, Mozart, or Chris Hemsworth, comparing ourselves to those we think are *really* smart or *really* good or *really* lucky, those we think have drawn better numbers in the various genetic, historical, or socio-economic lotteries that shape our lives—we get so caught up in comparing that in the end we lapse into despairing (I’ll never be like that) and stop showing up. And showing up is the first and most essential step.

Really, truth be known, we Protestants are partially to blame for this, especially we Presbyterians. You see, before there was “really smart” or “really good” or “really lucky” there was “really righteous.”

It started out well, with Protestants, particularly John Calvin and his followers, emphasizing—not inventing, but emphasizing—the teaching that everything we have that is good, and everything we are that is good, is a gift from God, that we are all always dependent on

God and God's grace, that it is all grace.

All of which is true and good. But soon enough it got crowded by a certain . . . well, deep-seated anxiety (am I really righteous or am I just a poser? When Jesus comes again on judgment day, will I be able to pass *his* standardized test? Will I be counted among God's elect?); all of which led to certain compare and despair (well, I'm more righteous than he is, that's for sure; but her? maybe not; and him? no way); all of which led to all kinds of techniques, strategies and tips for being, or becoming, or at least appearing to be, more righteous—techniques, strategies and tips which, come to think of it, are a lot like those we have now for academic success or living a better life in the new year: having a well-honed resume and well-toned abs being our culture's version of righteousness. All of which goes to show that you can take the culture out of Protestantism, but you can't take Protestantism out of the culture.

And to all of which I want to say the same thing: just show up.

Oh yes, yes, all that stuff—for academic success, for living a better life in the new year, for righteousness—it all has some value, it can be useful, it can help—at least it can't hurt if you stick with it. But really, in my experience, the first and most essential step for achieving any of it—or or anything for that matter—is just showing up. There are other steps—effort, discipline—and we can talk about those, we can work on those—but showing up, that's first, that's essential.

Just show up. In particular, in 2019, just show up to worship God, and more particularly just show up for communion (you may have noticed that I put all the Sunday morning communion dates on the front of your bulletin).

Why? Because here in worship and particularly here in communion, God promises to show up for us. God is with us. Just as God showed up in the manger, God is here for us. Here we will find grace: grace to deal with life's struggles and life's stuff, for example, to overcome habit and inertia, to develop more effort and discipline, to gain more control over our actions and our lives, and maybe to have less gnawing anxiety about our own self-worth in comparison to others, maybe to have more joy in just improving and doing our best and doing better, maybe to have a greater sense of connection to God and others, of peace and joy and gratitude for the gifts we share and a joyful readiness to share them with others, especially with those who have drawn worse numbers in the various genetic, historical, or socio-economic lotteries that shape our lives—because there is great joy in that.

Just show up here because it will help you show up everywhere else.

How can you know this? How can you know that you will experience God's grace here and and how can you be assured that you are *really* experiencing it? How can you know that this grace is—and will be—helping you show up elsewhere?

Those and other such questions are legitimate. And to all of them I want to say the same thing: just show up.

We can talk about—we can work on—all the rest; God will work on all the rest. But showing up, that's the first and most essential step. So in 2019, do yourself a favor: be faithful in a very little thing: just show up.

Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen