

Spiritual Life: “Life at the Shoreline” 9-5-10

This morning we are continuing our series, “Spiritual Life” In this series I am doing a couple of things:

First, I am using a metaphor of the beach and the ocean. **Ocean Diagram** The ocean represents the body of Christ, the church.

Second, I am using this metaphor to **illustrate 6 different stages** that people experience as they, seek to deepen their spiritual relationship with God and others. Each of these stages as we will see in scripture were opportunities for Jesus to disciple people, to take them from one spiritual place to another.

Last week we looked at the first stage, this person on the beach and I referred to them as an unchurched person, and the primary **relationship** in their life to help them move forward in their relationship with Christ is an Old trusted friend. **I talked about Philip and Nathanel** as an illustration of this relationship and the way Philip addressed the deep seated cynism in Nathanel’s life was to simply invited him to Come & See what Jesus had to offer.

If a person, like Nathanel, in your life does come on your invitation, we must realize that as a person coming to church for the 1st time or even the 1st year that they are not necessarily committed to what is going on here, **they are simply checking it out**. By their actions they are becoming a person at this second stage of spiritual development. The primary person at this point in the spiritual journey is a **Curious Person**.

This is an incredibly important part of our spiritual development. It is OK to be at this “checking it out” stage. It is OK to simply be curious about this whole thing and to be coming along with a friend or spouse. In essence, **what I am saying is you have the freedom to simply be curious in this church and to move forward spiritually, when you are ready**. Sometimes staying right where you are is vital to your growth as a believer, and to move forward too quickly could be hazardous.

(Story: One summer my family and I were on vacation and we were headed to, you got it, the ocean. However, we stopped for the afternoon and night at a hotel in Tennessee. The one requisite was that it had to have a pool. We have 4 daughters and they all loved the water. So after we got checked in, it wasn’t too long before we were down at the pool. My older two daughters were old enough to stand on the bottom in the shallow end. Our youngest was still in diapers and splashed around while being held in mine or Kathy’s arms, but our third child was at that stage where she was still too short to be in the water by herself, but she wanted the freedom away from Mom and Dad.

I was sitting on the side of the pool beside the steps, leading down into the shallow end, and Libby my third daughter, was making her way down the steps, while holding on to the metal pole. With each step she got deeper, finally she was one step before stepping off into the shallow end. The problem was she was already up to her chin. She looked over at me. Her little heart was ready to swim, but her body had not yet learned to. I saw it in her eyes, her heart was winning out. She stepped off the last step and her feet hit the bottom of the pool. The problem with that was her head was now about 7 inches under water. As I watched this whole thing happen only

inches from her, I was both terrified and laughing hysterically. I paused, and watched. Holding her breath, she looked around, not panicked in any way, then as if the light bulb went on. She raised her head up and looked at me, as if to say, 'well are you going to get me.' Then I scooped her up out of the water

Sometimes staying right where you are is vital to your growth as a believer. **There are things that need to be checked out, a kicking of the tires** so to speak. A person needs time to test the water. . It is time to gather more information, and to find out answers to your questions.

I have known people who have come and sat in the worship services for up to 21/2 years, simply because they just needed to do that. But what is most important is that you have time to **explore Jesus from a distance.**

In the book of Luke there is a guy who really was right at this point, his name was Zacchaeus, Luke 19:2-3 says, *"A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd.*

The key here was he wanted to see who Jesus was. There comes a moment in a person's life when they want to see who Jesus is. When you are at that point you are a curious person.

But there is a barrier to movement forward for a person at this stage. If you are at this stage you may be experiencing it and that barrier is **Heightened Sensitivity.**

Heightened Sensitivity is **a state that our bodies go into when we are in unknown territory.** Our invisible antennas are out; we are sensitive to everything around us.

Remember last week when we shared the story about Philip and Nathaniel, here is a part of the passage to refresh your memory.

Phillip found Nathaniel and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote- Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." 'Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?' Nathaniel asked. 'Come and see,' said Phillip.

John 1:44-46

Philip simply invited his unchurched friend to come and see Jesus.

Nathaniel is at a place of choice. In this case Nathaniel takes the invitation of his friend Philip and comes. Nathaniel is coming into unknown territory and he is testing the water. He doesn't know what might happen. **He is not coming because Jesus has credibility; he is coming because Philip, his friend, has credibility.**

Have you ever walked into a church for the first time? I have. **I was spring-loaded to the bail out position.** If anybody even as much as looked cross-eyed at me, I was out of there. That is what heightened sensitivity does to a person.

It is a significant barrier

Look at the next verse, in this story from last week, after Nathaniel takes the invitation:

"When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching, he said to him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathaniel asked. 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Phillip called you.'" John 1:47-49

What this verse sets up very well is this whole scenario that curious people go through when they first come to a church.

Look at what it says. *"When Jesus saw Nathaniel approaching..."* In other words, Nathaniel was coming in out of the parking lot and Jesus saw him. He greets him. Thus Jesus became the primary relationship for Nathaniel that must be in a curious person's life in order for them to be able to move forward in their spiritual development. That primary relationship is **New**

Acquaintances. These are the new people you meet after you step into the door. Some encounters might happen

- with the people that you sit near each Sunday,
- or meet in the gathering area or after church,
- or picking up your kids from children's ministry
- or walking back to your car.

These are encounters that God has uniquely created for the curious person. This is very much a part of our spiritual growth, even though they appear random.

And look how Nathaniel's heightened sensitivity plays itself out. He says, "*How do you know me?*" Nathaniel, is still cynical, which is the barrier from the first stage, but now he is also experiencing 'Heightened Sensitivity' This is a pretty lethal 1-2 punch that can take many people out of the pursuit of moving forward, however, with curiosity propelling him Nathaniel keeps moving forward. Still all and all Nathaniel is not impressed and needs some proof that Jesus' greeting is for real. The statement "*How do you know me?*" represents all the built up safe guards that a person would have in the position that Nathaniel finds himself. It is these safe guards that if you are a curious person causes you to need some proof, Proof of what? Proof of Authenticity.

Authenticity is a rare ingredient in relationships these days as it was in Jesus' day and it is one of the key ingredients in the primary ministry to a curious person. Which is an **Authentic High Impact Hospitality Ministry.**

A high impact hospitality ministry has all the same elements in it as you would have if you were having guests over for dinner to your house. What do most of us do when we are about to have visitors? We clean house; we prepare some special snacks. Why because we are entertaining guests.

It is why we must put so much time and effort into offering ministries with a bias toward excellence, because we want you to know we care about you when you come into this house.

Setting a culture within the church where people understand that we want to present ourselves in such a way as people who visit say "Wow, this was a great experience, they obviously care at this church."

But there is something else in that High Impact Hospitality Ministry and that is the word **Authentic**. This word happens through the primary relationships that help a curious person move forward in their spiritual development.

Jesus was that new acquaintance for Nathaniel and in response to Nathaniel's question of "How do you know me? Jesus answered "*I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Phillip called you.*" What Jesus was doing was making authentic connection with this curious Nathaniel.

What happened was that at the entrance to many towns and cities there were groves of trees and people would sit under the shade of those trees, well apparently Jesus upon entering the city where they were, saw Nathaniel under one of those trees and took note of him. Now some time has passed and here they are standing face to face.

I want you to think about this for a minute. Have you ever been taken note of, have you ever been noticed. (story: H.S. football practice)

When I first walked into this church 2 months ago. I was coming to check it out. It's true, I had been invited to be your pastor, but first and foremost, I am just a person like all of us. I wasn't sure if I knew anybody. **Then someone came up to me after the worship service** and really talked to Kathy and I. It immediately put me at ease. It helped me lower my defenses and I began to relax.

That is what happened to Nathaniel and Jesus made authentic connection with him. These random encounters may seem like nothing, but if we as the church intentionally make these connections, they can serve as doorways for people into a next stage of their life.

When a person who is genuinely curious is met by this kind of positive experience, they get back into their cars after the worship and they ask themselves, **“What am I going to do about this?”**

So let me close by talking straight to the curious person. Zacheus eventually came down from the sycamore tree and scripture said, salvation came to his house. Nathaniel eventually said to Jesus, “I get it! You are the Son of God.”

There is a syndrome that I have watched pervade our culture. We have become a culture full of curious people **who never really take the plunge.**

We sit at our computer screens and build relationships with people we never meet. We go to movies and dream that we could fly that high, or drive that fast or be that hero.

Testing the water for as long as you need is absolutely fine. **But let me tell you testing the water can become a way of life.** There is so much more.

Diving in is NOT about taking on greater involvement in the church. Diving in is about learning who this Jesus really is, the life-changer who wants to bring purpose and direction into your life.

The abundant life will never really be yours until one day you say “It's time, I believe this and I believe this with all of my heart. Then and only then will you know the power of God's love for you.

If the water of the church has been washing over your feet long enough and you feel it is time to make that commitment today let the reality that Christ died for you, that he took your faults, your mistakes upon himself, wash over you and say to Christ today, “I'm in, I commit myself to you, I am ready to enter the water and move to stage 3.

(Move to communion statements)