

Happy New Year! I hope you all have had a wonderful holiday season with family and friends. This time of year, the vast majority of people are looking ahead, trying to view 2023 with sobriety and clarity so they can accomplish everything they hope for the next twelve months. There is nothing magical about this specific date on the calendar, but there is something undeniable about the beginning of a new year to give us renewed focus. Seven years I went to the ophthalmologist to get new focus. My vision wasn't great; I had to wear contacts every day. But after going in for Lasik surgery, I came out 15 minutes later with 20/20 vision in one eye and 20/15 in the other. It was incredible to see clearly. But I noticed not that long ago that my vision was beginning to fade in my right eye. After a few months I finally set up an appointment with the optometrist. My vision had dropped to 20/30. Even though I had my vision reset seven years ago, I was in need of a new prescription to be able to see clearly today.

What happens with the slow deterioration of our vision can happen to any company or organization, it can happen to a church, it can happen in our personal lives. It's not enough to have had clarity on our vision at one point in time. We need to come back, again and again, with crystalized focus on our vision, so we have conviction and certainty on where we are heading and what we are supposed to be about.

That's the heart and logic behind this sermon series. To kick off the year, we are going to talk about the vision of our church as followers of Jesus. On May 25, 1961, in one of the most compelling vision statements history has ever seen, then-President John F. Kennedy declared to Congress that by the end of the decade we would land a man on the moon. That was the vision: we will walk on the moon. Because that was the desired future, the mission was clear: we have eight years to build a rocket that can take a person to the moon and bring them home safely. With that clear, compelling vision before them, NASA labored tirelessly for a decade. Then, on July 20, 1969, Apollo 11 landed on the moon. A vision defines our desired future state and focuses our energy and effort to help it become a reality.

Some of you may remember Olympic shooter Matt Emmons, who won a gold, silver, and bronze medal in different Games. In 2004, he was one shot away from winning a double gold medal at the Olympics. He took aim, fired—bullseye. But he was aiming at the wrong target. Instead of finishing first, he fell to eighth. As a church, we have to make absolutely certain we have our eyes focused on the right target. The old adage proves true: it doesn't matter how far you make it up the ladder if the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. As a church, it is not enough to have a vision. We have to make absolutely certain that the vision we have as a church is God's vision for our church, so we have taken all of our language directly from Jesus' own words. After Jesus died for our sins and rose again, right before he rose to heaven, he spoke his final words:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Jesus' last words are our first priority, so how we express our vision is clear. It's all about **connecting people to Jesus**.

Connection with Jesus is twofold: first, for everyone who already knows Jesus it means deep participation with the life of Christ, and reliance on his power, wisdom, and strength. Jesus says in John 15:4-5, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”

Did you see how many times Jesus says we need to remain in him? Connecting people to Jesus begins with evangelism for those who don't know him. But it continues by remaining in him for our entire life, drawing our energy, joy, passion, endurance, identity, and hope from him. That's what we want to do as a church.

Two of my kids' favorite snacks are grapes and raisins. They can eat these by the dozens. They are both delicious. They're really the same thing. What's the difference? Raisins have spent longer without connection to the vine. The longer they go with no connection, the drier and more shriveled they get. The same thing happens to the human soul. God did not create us to thrive on our own. The one and only way God created us to flourish is in deep connection with him.

I'd love to recommend a book for you to read this year. It's called [The Spirit of the Disciplines](#) by Dallas Willard. It is some of the best stuff I've ever read about staying connected with Jesus. Listen to some of his words:

When we call men and women to life in Christ Jesus, we are offering them the greatest opportunity of their lives—the opportunity of a vivid companionship with him, in which they will learn to be like him and live as he lived. The heart of the New Testament message is that we can become like Christ in character and in power and in constant fellowship with God the Father.

That's what we are going for—constant fellowship with God! Brother Lawrence, a monk who lived in the 17th century, wrote about this. He lived in a monastery outside Paris, where his job, every day, was to wash the dishes for everyone who lived in or visited the monastery. It was a routine, monotonous job, but he learned, in the midst of his everyday and rather boring assignments, to meet with God. He said:

The most holy and necessary practice in our spiritual life is the presence of God. That means finding constant pleasure in His divine company, speaking humbly and lovingly with him in all seasons, at every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way. There's no greater lifestyle and no greater happiness than that of having a continual conversation with God.”

Dallas Willard and Brother Lawrence are just two people who are trying to express, in their own words, what Jesus said in John 15. We are the branch, he is the vine, and the most pressing priority on our life, every single day, is to remain in him. It is the only path to life. That is the heart behind so many of the ministries of our church. From Rooted to life groups, from our focus on prayer to preparing daily devotions for everyone in our church to engage with on a daily basis, we do everything we can to slant the floor to continuous, ongoing, intimate connection with Jesus. We're kicking this year off with 21 days of prayer. Our team has put together a resource to guide you, in a few minutes every day, in reading God's Word, reflection, and prayer. Go to TheCreek.org/subscribe to sign up. We want to kick this year off right, in intimate devotion to Jesus and connection with him.

That's the first aspect of our vision of connecting people to Jesus. The second is helping people who do not yet believe in God learn the good news of who God is and of all that he has done for the world, and to know that they can have a personal relationship with God by placing their faith in Jesus. The Bible calls us again and again to do everything we possibly can to help people who do not yet have a relationship with God to place their faith in Jesus.

Jesus himself told several stories in Luke 15 about the importance of finding people who are lost. He told first of a shepherd who had 100 sheep. After he counted them and realized one was lost, do you know what he did? He did not say, “Well, a 99% success rate isn’t too bad.” He left the 99 to find the one. When he found that sheep, what did he do? He called his friends to celebrate and rejoice with him. Next, Jesus told a story of a woman who had ten coins, representing her entire life savings. She lost one of the coins. What did she do? Did she say, “Well, at least I still have nine”? No! She stopped everything and turned the entire house upside down until she found it. When she found it, how did she respond? She invited all her friends over to celebrate with her.

Finally, Jesus told a story of a man who had two sons. One son asked for his inheritance early, which was a way of saying to his dad, “I don’t care about you; all I care about is your money. You are as good as dead to me.” The father was heartbroken but gave his son the inheritance. The son went off to a distant country, indulged in wild living, and then, flat broke, found himself working in a pig sty, so starved he wanted to eat the food they were feeding the pigs. He longed for home, so he got up and went home, the whole way rehearsing his speech about how he just wanted to be a servant in his father’s house. Jesus says, “While he was still a long way off, the Father saw him, and ran to him, threw his arms around him, kissed him, put a robe on his back, new sandals on his feet, a ring on his finger.” He’s restoring him to full sonship. The father said, “Slaughter the fattened calf.” Why? Because just like with the shepherd who lost a sheep and the woman who lost a coin, what was of great value had been found, and it was time to celebrate!

Everyone in the household did celebrate—everyone except one person: his older brother. While everyone else was partying, the older brother was in his room, wanting nothing to do with the celebration. His dad knocked on the door and said, “Hey, what’s going on?” His brother said, “Why does he get a party? Why are you celebrating him? I’m the one who has been here the whole time, why aren’t I the center of attention?”

The older brother was so focused on himself, he didn’t care one bit for the joy of his father in having his lost son come back home. Sadly, many religious people today are like that older brother. They want the entire focus of the church to be on them. But if we truly capture the heart of our Father, and we realize how much he loves every person he created, how desperate he is to have them in his home, we will do whatever it takes, move heaven and earth to make that happen.

There are three different ways the older brother could have responded: he could have (1) pouted, whined, and complained like we see here, (2) he could have been happy that his brother returned home and joined in the celebration, which would have been quite a bit better, or (3) while his brother was still gone, the older brother, out of love for his brother and his father, could have left the comfort and safety of his house and gone himself on a search and rescue mission to find his brother and bring him home. That’s the sort of children God is calling us to be.

We all know what it’s like to put in effort to find something that is lost. You lose your phone and it’s all hands on deck to find your phone. You lose your wallet and you’re calling the last store you were at where you know you had it. How many of you lose your keys often? There is nothing like getting ready to walk out the door, knowing you timed things perfectly to show up at the next place, only to not be able to find your keys and be frantically rifling through the pillows on your couch and every nook and cranny in your bedroom. A few years ago, around this time of year, Keren and I went to our life group meeting on a Wednesday night. We had a wonderful time, drove home, and the next day Keren couldn’t find her keys. We searched high and low in our house for a few hours, but found nothing. I told Keren to call our friends who hosted the meeting and ask them; they searched through their house and found nothing. There are a lot of small kids in our group, so Keren texted all the moms and had them interrogate their kids to see if they hid her keys somewhere—nothing. For months, no keys. On occasion I would make sarcastic

remarks about how we need to be more responsible with things. Around May, five months later, I went into our closet, picked out a coat I hadn't worn in a while, put my hands in the pocket—and guess what I found! The entire time the keys were right there. It wasn't Keren's fault or the kids' fault. It was my fault. I am still eating humble pie. It's one thing to search for keys that aren't really lost. It's entirely different when we are talking about real people, people who have a real soul and will spend eternity somewhere, and about doing everything we possibly can to see them have a life-changing encounter with Jesus.

In Mark 2 Jesus was teaching in a house and there were so many people no one could get in. A group of guys had brought their paralyzed friend for Jesus to heal, but because of the crowds they couldn't get to Jesus. So what did they do? “Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on” (Mark 2:4), They were so committed to getting their friend to Jesus that they tore off the roof and lowered the man down. Come on! Think about that. The roof is falling in on people, dirt, leaves, sticks, dust flying everywhere, crashing down on people. People are yelling at them, saying they've lost their minds, they need to be patient and wait their turn, and they just keep on digging away. "We have to get our friend to Jesus." When they did, what happened? When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:5). We want to be the sort of church who will tear roofs apart to connect people to Jesus. Whatever the cost. No matter the obstacles. This is what we are called to do. This is our vision!

Sometimes it can seem intimidating to think about bringing “everyone” to Jesus. What I want to call and challenge everyone who is a part of this church and already has faith in the Lord to do is pray and ask God to show them one person they can share Christ with this year. Not a hundred, not a dozen, only one.

If everyone in this church did that, there would be thousands more people connected to Jesus. We want to do our best to empower you to share Christ with people, so we want to put a few things in your hands. First, we are going to make it really easy to invite a friend, family member, or co-worker to church. Four times a year, once a quarter, every Easter, every summer, every fall, and every Christmas, we are going to do a big, special, fun event here at the church that is really non-threatening to invite someone to. We'll put something in your hands to give them (for example, “Here's a jar of hot cocoa. If you don't have a place to celebrate Christmas Eve this year, we'd love to have you join us at our church!). Eighty-two percent of non-church attenders say they would be at least somewhat likely to attend a church if someone invited them, but only 2% of church-goers invite someone each year. We have to see a different number at The Creek; we have to have everyone engaged, living on mission, doing whatever we can to see people who are far from the Lord connected to Jesus.

One really fun thing we've been doing the last year or so is new neighbor bags. For the last 14 months, every time someone moved to within a few miles of our church, I and all the other staff members here at The Creek would go to their door and give them a gift just like this one. We aren't trying to be weird or awkward. We say something like, “We are with the church right across the street from the high school. We know you moved in recently and we wanted to give you a housewarming gift. There's a water bottle and a couple other fun goodies. We want to be great neighbors; if there is ever anything we can do for you, just say the word—it would be our great honor!” Over the last year our staff has given hundreds and hundreds of these away. We've had so many incredible interactions. People are blown away by the generosity and kindness. But instead of having our staff do them, we want to make them available for you to take them to anyone who moves in on your street.

I want to share with you the story of a man named Pat, who gave his life to Jesus and was baptized just a few months ago.

My adult life started early. By the age of 19, I had a wife, my first daughter and a house payment. Before long we added five more kids to our family and my number one job was to make money for us to be able to survive. I worked as much as I could and took as many side jobs as possible. One thing I made sure that I always had enough money for was a six-pack of Miller Lite tall boys every day. On Sundays, drinking beer was more important to me than going to church. About two years ago my son started dating a young lady who attended The Creek. I decided to go one Sunday. I thought the entire service was just for me. I was blown away. I left with tears in my eyes, not even able to speak. Eventually I made the decision to be baptized and now I serve at church every single week. Before surrendering to Christ, parts of my life were a mess. It was my fault, but my work life was a mess, my marriage was a mess. Since making that decision I have stopped drinking. I am treating my wife way better and my marriage is great. I see God's blessing everywhere I look, and I know my relationship with God will last forever.

If you meet Pat, you won't be able to miss his joy; it's contagious. He is the foreman of a construction crew. Every day he gathers his team together and prays with them. On Mondays he tells them about the message at church the day before. Having just met Jesus he wants to share the good news with everyone!

That's what it's all about. We want a lot more stories just like his! That is our vision: connecting people to Jesus. Every one of us who knows the Lord knows him because someone helped us know him. They helped our faith get started, they helped our faith grow and deepen. They've given us the greatest gift in the world. Now we have the privilege of paying that forward and passing it on. We are going to do whatever it takes to connect people to Jesus!