

“STEP UP TO GREATER THINGS!”

John 14:8-14

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It's an exciting time at Church of the Saviour! With the opening of the new facilities for children, weekly progress reports on our Habitat House, a record number of youth and adults involved in our mission work trip, and the arrival of new people to our congregation — both those who are moving into the area and those who are being born and adopted into our family of faith — this is an exciting place to be!

To those who are parents or grandparents, or even those who have younger brothers and sisters, nieces, nephews or cousins: do you remember baby's first word? When did he or she start to talk? How old was she? What did he say? My mom claims that once I started talking, I never stopped! I heard that “Amen!” Do you remember baby's first step? Again, my mom will tell you that I was left-handed from day one. She says that I was left-footed as well. She says that my first step was with my left foot. What can I say? Mothers know these things!

Baby's first step — whether with the right foot or the left — is a very significant event. From that moment on, baby becomes more independent of mom and dad and more dependent upon the environment to learn and to grow. First baby toddles around on those rubbery little legs, holding on to a chair here, a coffee table there. Then as he or she gains more confidence, baby tries it on her own. Finally there comes the day when baby is not crawling up and down the steps anymore, but walking upright — first holding daddy's hand, then all by himself!

It is interesting that the New Testament compares new Christians to babies. In the book of Hebrews, the leaders of the early church are counseled to serve milk, not solid food, to the new converts. In other words, teach the people what it means to live a Christian life gradually — as good parents help their children grow by providing age-appropriate challenges and support. How timely these words for us today, when those of us who have been around for a while use “churchy” language and forget that there are many among us who are new to the faith or at least new to this congregation.

Every time I meet with new parents in preparation for the baptism of their little one, I remind them that babies grow up quickly! Enjoy them at every age and stage. I joke with the acolytes that we need to put bricks on their heads to keep them from getting any taller. Some of the kids that were in preschool when we moved here are now towering over me! If there's one thing that we can't stop — it's kids growing up! Many of you have heard me say before: it seems like yesterday that I was holding my sons in my arms, giving them a bottle, rocking them to sleep, getting up in the night to change a diaper. My oldest son turned thirty a month ago. Where does the time go?

Well, the New Testament writers used these images for a reason. Just as new Christians

are referred to as “babes in Christ,” so it is assumed that believers will grow and mature in the faith. Nothing is more concerning than a child who does not grow — who must have growth hormones and all the rest. Nothing is more distressing than a child who is immature and doesn’t behave in age-appropriate ways. Nothing is more concerning to God than disciples who get stuck and do not grow in faith and in their understanding of the things of the spirit.

Today’s Scripture was chosen as our stewardship campaign theme by Mike and Tina Yost, and it is a wonderfully challenging text. The disciples are asking to see God. Jesus responds by telling them that in seeing Jesus, they are experiencing the presence of God. If they want to know what God is doing, then they need to pay attention as Jesus heals the sick, cures the lame, and causes the blind to see. If they want to know what is important to God, they need to follow Jesus around as he reaches out to the least and the lost.

Then Jesus says something that is totally shocking to the disciples, and I dare say even more shocking to us. He says that if we follow Jesus, we will do the things that Jesus does, and in fact, even **greater things** than we have seen Jesus do! At first we are taken aback, for just to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe would be wonderful. Just to be close to this man for a day, an hour, would be heaven. But Jesus wants us not only to experience his presence, but to follow his example, to walk in his steps, to do what he has done — give our lives for others in sacrificial love.

That sounds good to most of us. But it’s a long way from where we live. We read the New Testament stories about how the apostles devoted themselves totally to living like Jesus lived. We know that what started out as a small group of twelve ordinary men and a small group of ordinary women who followed Jesus not only to the cross, but to the empty tomb — this motley crew changed the world! We read about what Mother Theresa has done, what Desmond Tutu has done, and we think – wow!

This morning we need to think about Christian growth, not as something for somebody else who is more dedicated than we are, has more resources than we have, and less problems and day to day responsibilities than we do. Instead we need to ask ourselves what God is calling **us** to do. Someone wrote a book recently called *Christianity for the Rest of Us*. It’s a kind of handbook on how Joe the Plumber can be a disciple of Jesus Christ. It is possible you know. As the old Chinese proverb says, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.”

This morning I am going to ask you to take a step, to take a step of faith. I am going to be so bold as to say that you can’t be a Christian and leave your wallet untouched. You can’t be a disciple of Jesus Christ without it making a difference in your checkbook. It just isn’t possible. The Bible has a lot to say about giving. According to those who study these things, the word “believe” appears in the Bible 273 times, “pray” appears 371 times and “love” appears 714 times. The word **“give” appears 2,172 times**. The Bible seems to indicate that there is a connection between the heart and the wallet.

Many places in the Bible the word “tithe” appears. Originally, in an agrarian society, one tenth of the crop was to be taken to the Temple as an offering to God for a bountiful harvest; one lamb in ten; one goat, one sheep. The tithe has continued to be the standard held by the church for giving, but in our modern world, with so many things vying for our resources, most Christians give at a level far below 10%. In fact, you may say that considering a tithe is not realistic for me.

I would say, as a word of personal testimony and also as a challenge to each of us, that

when my wife and I got married, we made the decision to tithe our income. Although we have never had large salaries, we have always had enough, more than enough, truth be told. We have always managed to live on 90% of our income, after giving God 10%, with two boys to feed and care for and put through college and all the rest. When the Capital Campaign came along for the new building, we took the campaign seriously and made our pledge “over and above” the 10%. It was a stretch, because we are still paying off our sons’ college loans, but God has continued to provide.

This morning I am asking you to take a step up, a step of faith and increase your giving to the church. A group of faithful disciples from the North Coast District, including several from our congregation, went on a mission work trip to Haiti about a month ago. One of the members of the group, Gina Evangelista, noticed as she walked down the streets of the city a rather common sight: one story homes with a stairway on the outside that seemingly led to nowhere. What is the purpose of these staircases, she asked? As we all know, Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the people there have neither the money to build adequate homes nor the building materials they need. And so many of the people use what they have to build the first floor of the house. Then as an act of faith, they build the stairs to where they envision a second floor will someday be. These are not stair steps to nowhere, you see, but steps to the future, steps to a better life.

The step I am asking you to take this morning is a step of faith. It is a step that will hopefully move us closer to God and to each other. For some, it will be step toward the tithe. For others, it will be a step beyond the tithe. For all of us it will be a spiritual experience, for, as Jesus reminds us, “*Where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.*” (Matt.6:21). Will you take a step up and do greater things for the Kingdom of God?

A story about taking that risky step will not leave my mind. It is a story about a village high in the Alps where there was a devastating fire. Many homes were destroyed. The next day the monks came through the village to collect alms for those who had lost everything the night before. At the first house an elderly woman came to the door. Could she help? Of course she could! “Poor dears,” she said. “Left without food and clothes. And in this cold winter wind and snow.” She invited the monks into her small home while she scurried around to gather food, pots and pans and anything else she could find. She even took the blanket off her bed and the quilt from her chair. “Maybe the children could use this to help keep warm,” she said. Keeping only the clothes that she was wearing, she gave all her sweaters, even her coat to help the cause. The monks thanked her and left.

At the next house, the reception was different. An elderly woman came to the door, but alas, she felt that she really had nothing she could spare. She had an extra blanket or two, but it gets chilly on these cold winter nights, and you never know when you might need an extra blanket. Food? No, her pantry was well-stocked, but it would be a long winter, and she’d hate to run short. As the monks turned to leave, the woman noticed a moth-eaten rug in the corner of the kitchen. She was planning to throw it out, but it really wasn’t any use to her. “Here, you can have this,” she said, giving the old rug to the monks. They thanked her and left.

That night some remaining embers were fanned into flame by the wind and the rest of the homes in the village burned to the ground. Both women were taken to the monastery. Then the woman who had given everything found that she still had what she had given, while the other woman discovered that all she had was a moth-eaten old rug.

Now I would not want to suggest that things always work out that way in life. But I am convinced of one thing: in the final accounting, **all we have is what we have given away.**

God is calling us to do greater things than we have done before — as a church and as individuals. Will you take a step up? Will you allow God to increase your faith? Will you demonstrate your gratitude and your faithfulness to God this day? **Take a step up to greater things!** Take a step of faith today.

Prayer: Dear God, in these uncertain and challenging economic times, as we hear discouraging financial news almost every day, help us to put our faith and trust in you. When we are thinking straight, we acknowledge that you have given us enough, more than enough to supply our needs. In gratitude, may we give back to you, knowing that in giving we will be drawn closer to you and closer to one another. Help us to take the next step of faith this day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.