

Many years ago, a young woman committed to the practice of daily prayer. She woke up one morning and began to read Scripture and pray. The woman was routinely distracted by her cat who kept trying to get her attention. The cat did not mind being put on to a leash so the woman decided that the next day she would wake up, put her cat on a leash at the end of her bed and then enter into a time of prayerful meditation. And so began a habit that the woman carried with her until her peaceful end of life death. Every morning-wake up, put a leash on the cat, spend time in prayer with God.

This woman had a daughter. The daughter saw her mother practice this ritual for years and years as she was growing up. Leash the cat, pray. Leash the cat, pray. The daughter, living in a different generation and time loved God and attended church regularly and also wanted to start her mornings in prayer. Like her mom she woke up in the morning and lovingly leashed her cat to the end of her bed. She though was a busy working mom so she would say a quick prayer and then go about her morning grooming routine. Day after day she woke up, put a leash on her cat, said a quick prayer, hopped in the shower and then got dressed for work before taking the cat off the leash.

When this working woman became a mother, her son would see his mom wake up, lovingly put a leash on the family cat, and he would wind up watching her as

she did her make up and got ready for work. When the son grew to be a man, he was of yet a different generation and time and he had fallen away from the church. He didn't have much of a relationship with God and felt no need to pray. However, every morning the son would wake up, put his cat on a leash at the end of his bed and then get ready for work. When he got married, his partner asked why he put the cat on a leash every morning. Having observed it his whole life but not given it much thought, the young husband really did not have an answer to why he put the cat on the leash.

You see my friends, when the grandmother first started the habit with the cat it was for a specific reason. The cat went on the leash so she could have uninterrupted prayer time. In time that practice remained the same but the reason FOR the practice changed.

We might get a chuckle out of the absurdity of this story, but the reality is that many of us have habits and practices that come from learned behaviors that no longer serve our purposes. I know this is true for us as individuals and I think it is true for the church as a whole.

In one of my first congregations, we decided to introduce contemporary music to the service. Within a few weeks the church went from having only an organ to having an organ, piano, guitar, and, you guessed it Norm, a drum. Many people

were supportive of this change and had a deep desire to reach new people with new music but there were some really angry voices who felt like the leadership and I were taking the church in an awful direction because, for them, the organ was the only authentic true music of the church. You can imagine then their surprise when I reminded them that when the organ was introduced to the Christian church famous leaders like Martin Luther said things like “the organ in the worship service is a sign of Baal (the devil)”. I had to remind them over and over again that the organ was sacred for them because it was the habit they knew and loved. The organ connected them to God in the ways that the grandmother experienced when she was not interrupted by her cat. But, having the organ, not having the organ, was about personal habits and preferences. What matters most as we continue to build and strengthen the body of Christ is the Why. Why do we worship? Why do we sing and praise?

So how do we find our why? In our passage this morning Jesus has returned to his hometown Nazareth and by this point he has a bit of a reputation of being a powerful teacher. So here he is in the synagogue of his hometown where the people who remember him as a little kid, who know his mom and earthly father, and he stands up, opens up a scroll and reads “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to

proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Now this in itself was no big deal, he was simply reading and quoting from the book of Isaiah. But then Jesus has the audacity to say, "Today the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". In other words, Jesus is saying I am the one Isaiah prophesized about. This is my mission statement. This is why I am here. I am here because I have been anointed to bring good news, I have come to release the captives and give sight to the blind. You can imagine the established elders raising an eyebrow with the unasked question "who does he think he is". But Luke 4, I believe is Jesus' why statement. When Jesus casts out demons, heals the leper and paralyzed man, when Jesus frees the poor with a message of the coming of God's kingdom, when Jesus teaches and preaches that God will save all who come to him, when he spits on the mud and covers the blind man's eyes, when he proclaims that there is hope for the brokenhearted, time and time and time again Jesus is living out his why mission statement. He is remembering why God sent him, what he is called to do, and it drives his whole ministry. Jesus, knowing and proclaiming his "why" becomes a guiding light and a driving force for his entire earthly ministry. A few years ago, I was feeling really burned out. I was serving a church that had significant conflict and much of the conflict had to do with the essence of who I

am. There is not much I can do about that. I can't authentically change who I am or how God has made me and equipped me for ministry. In a moment of crisis, a colleague asked me what my why was. Why did I still show up on Sundays? Why did I still care? Why did I still want to serve God through the church. After I got through the surface answers of "I need a paycheck and medical coverage" I moved more deeply and said, "Because I have been radically transformed by the love of God and I desperately want others to know how deeply God loves them." That became my Why statement and it gave my weary soul a reset that I was longing for. My colleague asked me to wake up every morning and tell myself that statement. It made a huge impact on my perspective and strengthened me to face some real challenges with a peace that truly passes all understanding. I hope you will ask yourself the why question. Why do you do what you do? Why do you get up on a Sunday morning and worship? Why do you give God your hard-earned money? Why do you spend your vacation time volunteering on a mission trip? Why? Why? Why? As you dig deep, allow your why statement to reset your soul and inspire you in your discipleship

And as we move beyond our individual selves, what if we really looked at who we are as a congregation, what if we really looked at who God is calling us to be and then asked powerful "why" questions. Why do we worship the way we do? Why

do we have small groups? Why do we do mission work? Why? Why? Why? And as we ask those questions it is imperative that we continually ask ourselves if it is still serving its purpose in its current form. You know Luke 4 describes Jesus' mission statement for himself but to his followers he gives this commandment in John 13 where he says that we ought to "love one another just as he has loved us". If Christ is giving us the mission of loving one another as he has loved us then how are our practices, how are habits, how are the ways we have always done it before serving that mission...or not?

My friends I believe that the church universal, not just First Church, but the Christian church is in a time of transformation and change. That change, like most changes is full of unknowns and uncertainties, which, for me at least is scary. But I believe in a God who always has the final victory, I believe in a God who will be praised even if it is only the rocks who will cry out in adoration, I believe in a God who can create everything from nothing, I believe in a God who leads us always into a future with hope. I believe in a God who works all things for good.

Believing this I refuse to be discouraged or afraid of what lies ahead. Believing this, I roll up my sleeves and say "ok God, let's see what you are up to now".

Believing this, I am willing to ask the deep hard questions of why do we do what we do, and to make the necessary changes to reach people in new and relevant

ways. I am willing to stop putting the cat on the leash in the morning because it no longer serves our purposes and I pray that you are too. As we look at how God might reset our souls individually, I ask that you continue to be in real prayer about how God might reset the soul of the church we call our faith family.

I'd like to close with a short but powerful clip that the bishop showed at a clergy gathering a few years ago about the power of finding your why. Let's take a look...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ytFB8TrkTo>

My friends, my siblings in Christ, may our what be more powerful as we fully realize our why. Amen and amen.