

I remember Mr. Kelly, the vice principal of Queen Elizabeth High School in Calgary when I was a student there. I know this sounds like ancient history, but Jim Kelly was one of those larger than life guys you never forget. I'm not kidding about being larger than life. Mr. Kelly was the football coach which always seemed weird to me because at about 5'6, he was as tall as he was round. Biggest guy I ever met. I never knew they could put so much material into a pair of slacks or that belts could be made that long.

When he started to go bald, he shaved his head long before it was fashionable to do so, but he would always let it grow back, long and weird before shaving it again. As the school's disciplinarian, everyone wanted to be in detention with him, because he always made it fun. He always shared a joke with the students and he challenged us to be the best we could be – not just academically, but as people – not just with grades, but with human kindness.

There was a six month period when Mr. Kelly wasn't around and when he returned, his head was shaved for a completely different reason. He had had surgery to remove a tumor in his brain and the huge black scar ran in the shape of a crescent moon from the back of his neck to the top of his ear. I remember in math one time, after his surgery, when kids were celebrating getting a 65% passing grade, Mr. Kelly shot back a piece of his everyday wisdom that had a way of stopping everyone. With his scar still really visible he said "I'm just really glad my brain surgeon got more than 65% on his medical exams before sticking a scalpel into my head."

What does it take to be a model citizen? What does it take to get something more than 65% on your math exam? What does it take to become a brain surgeon? What does it take to follow in the footsteps of Christ?

I remember the Olympics and all the sponsorship and endorsement commercials that appeared on TV, with the athletes promoting everything from orange juice to investment portfolios. The commercials I remember most are those that featured the early morning images of figure skaters making patterns of figure eights in the ice for hours. Pass after pass; circle after circle in a disciplined practice for years, at the cost of a social life, a family life, sometimes an educational life, to be able to compete at the Olympic level.

What does it take to become an Olympic figure skater? What does it take to be the best soccer player in the league? What does it take to be an incredible improvisational jazz pianist? What does it take to love one another as Christ loved his followers?

The text Kelly read for us this morning comes from about the 3rd century before the Common Era. It seems to appear out of nowhere in the scriptures and we don't really know the identity of the author. Ecclesiastes is a Latin transliteration of a Greek translation of the Hebrew word for gatherer, or teacher, or preacher. It appears in the "writings" section of the Old Testament and it is not connected to any of the meta stories usually associated with the early Hebrew people. It just seems to appear. And it seems to be the author's evaluation of the randomness of life.

If you go home this afternoon and read all of Ecclesiastes, you'll see that except for these 15 verses or so, the author admits to a despair in life. All life is futile and meaningless. All life is fraught with conflict, self centeredness, separation from God. Now there's a happy read for a Sunday afternoon. But I do think it's useful.

Then the writer notices the cycles of life. If you count, the author lifts up 14 seeming opposites in the tender space of time. There is a time to be born and a time die, a time for dancing and a time for mourning, a time to plant a time to harvest, a time to seek and time to lose. You can feel the gentle sway between these opposites...It's like a lullaby of life's experience. 14 opposites. Count them. 2 X 7. 7 is the number for perfection in Jewish numerology and here we have 2 sets of perfection in the gentle grace of time. It's exquisite poetry.

And against this backdrop the author acknowledges that while we have been created in the image and likeness of God "God has put a sense of past and future into their minds," the writer acknowledges that we are not the sum total of God "yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end."

What's to be done then, says the author? We are called to be happy and enjoy life, for there is nothing better in all the universe than "to eat and drink, and find pleasure in all our toil." But how do we do any of this, if we are walking around asleep? That's my description of how we 21st century people live in the world. We are asleep to the passions and the beauty of what it means to be present to our work, to our companions, to our eating and our sleeping.

These are the two points I want to make this morning in our season of discipleship. There is something about a disciplined practice in loving unconditionally, and there is

something about making it count everyday, of practicing every moment the good pleasure of eating and drinking and finding pleasure in our toil.

I've had lots of reaction to last week's sermon in which it seemed I listed the six things to earn your way into heaven; or the six things that make us good people; or the six behaviors that will save the church. Some of you were honked. Some of you said right on. Some of you wondered how that had anything to do with filling the pews.

From time to time over the past three years, you have quoted back to me the ideas that seemed to have touched you the most, ideas I've wondered about. "The church does not exist to serve itself; the church exists to serve the community." "The church's only job is to help people remember their goodness." "What would love do now?" "What does it cost you to forgive?" "This is the most important thing we'll do in our week." "Prayer changes me, and that changes the world." "You are the beloved...claim it for yourself." "You create your own experience."

I think we can trace all of these ideas back to the ministry of Jesus; in the life he lived, the words he taught, and the actions he modeled. Jesus ministry is rooted in the fundamental pattern of life – "for everything there is a season" AND in the two fold law – love God and love neighbor. To be a follower of this Jesus of Nazareth, is to practice what he practiced. Jesus didn't talk a lot about beliefs, other than his belief in what people could become. He showed us how to live and how to love.

That list I presented last week is a snapshot of what love looks like. That's why Michael Foss, the author of the book, calls them the marks of discipleship. With the question "what does it look like to love the way Jesus loved," Foss attempts an answer with these marks of discipleship. Love looks like this. Followers of Jesus have these marks: They pray daily. They worship weekly. They read the scriptures. They make spiritual friends. They serve the world. They give generously of their financial resources.

What are the marks of a brain surgeon? What does becoming an Olympic skater look like? When you look at a gifted improvisational jazz pianist, what do you see? What images do you have of followers of Christ – like Martin Luther King Jr., or Desmond Tutu, or Marilyn Mann, or Jill Parsons, or Barbara Matiru and others? All have one thing in common...all. Disciplined practice! All follow a practice that has a particular look, which leads to growth, empowerment and becoming the next greatest vision of themselves.

The first three of those marks are the ones that cause us the greatest problems, because they're the three in which as a whole community, we're the least practiced. To pray daily, to worship weekly, to regularly read and study the scriptures.

How many times have I heard people say to me, I can be a good Christian and not go to church on Sunday? Every time I respond with, actually that's not true. The problem in our culture is that we equate good person with good Christian. We equate good Christian with the quality of our character. And that's just not so. Your goodness is not in question. The quality of your character is not measured by your belief systems. However, to be a good Christian is to plant yourself in the footsteps of Jesus, living as he lived, loving as he loved, practicing what he practiced. I love quoting Christina Kinch as she sets a kind of spiritual standard: "You can't expect to be the best soccer player in the world by showing up on the soccer field and watching for 20 minutes every now and then." One of the marks of discipleship is weekly worship.

The season of prayer that we just ended before Christmas was designed to teach us how to pray – not just some of us, all of us. Whether it's the "give me" kind of prayer or the quiet meditative prayer of silence, the practice of daily prayer, enables us, more than any other, to love. One of the marks of discipleship is daily prayer.

And when scripture contains references to all human emotional experience which connects us to all of life here and now, and beyond; when it is at the heart of our worship; when it forms the idea around which people gather for Friday Night Live; zoning out when it's time to engage its wisdom only serves to cut us off from the stories that mark OUR path. One of the marks of discipleship is the regular reading and study of scripture.

It's funny, I don't apologize for setting this bar either. I'm asked all the time by people outside the church, people suspicious of the church's tendency for judgment: "what does it mean to be part of the church? What value will it have in my life?" And I say we follow a guy who called us to our highest selves. He called us to our highest selves individually and he called us to our highest selves as community. It's about seeing this incredible world and everyone and everything in it through the eyes of love. History shows that we don't know how to do that very well. So being part of the church is about learning how to love all over again. And that takes practice. Amen.