

# Learning to Be and Do by Being and Doing

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
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**Hebrews 6:9-10 NIV** <sup>9</sup> Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. <sup>10</sup> God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.

**Luke 9:1-6 GNT** <sup>1</sup> Jesus called the twelve disciples together and gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. <sup>2</sup> Then he sent them out to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick, <sup>3</sup> after saying to them, “Take nothing with you for the trip: no walking stick, no beggar’s bag, no food, no money, not even an extra shirt. <sup>4</sup> Wherever you are welcomed, stay in the same house until you leave that town; <sup>5</sup> wherever people don’t welcome you, leave that town and shake the dust off your feet as a warning to them.” <sup>6</sup> The disciples left and traveled through all the villages, preaching the Good News and healing people everywhere.

From Luke’s gospel we heard the report that one day Jesus sent his disciples out. “Preach about the Kingdom of God,” he told them, “and heal people who are sick.”

Did you ever wonder what it must have been like for them? Where, exactly, did they go? Who went where? What did they do when they got wherever it was they ended up? How did they start?

You see, the disciples had been following Jesus for some time — days or weeks, maybe months even, but not years. So far they’d listened to Jesus preach to others. He’d addressed some lessons to them. They’d watched as he brought healing to mind or body or spirit. But Luke’s gospel doesn’t tell us about Jesus ever teaching *them* how to “preach the Kingdom of God” or “drive out demons” or “cure diseases.” How did they know what to do?

When I was a seminary student in Chicago I spent one summer enrolled in a full-time hospital chaplaincy program. There were, I think, five of us from four different seminaries, under the direction of the hospital chaplain. Our first morning together was spent in get-acquainted chats, a walking tour of the hospital, overviews of what the summer would hold for us, getting our pictures taken for our official hospital ID badges.

After lunch in the hospital cafeteria we returned to our conference room. The chaplain told us that each of us would be assigned to work in a particular unit of the hospital. My assignment was split between a medical-surgical floor and the pediatrics floor. After we each had our assignments and had figured out where they were located, the chaplain said, “Okay, let’s see. It’s 1:15 p.m. Come back at 3.” And he got up and walked to his office.

We looked at each other. He hadn't told us what, exactly, we were to do once we reached our floors. What were we supposed to say? How do you "be a chaplain?" He hadn't told us. Ten weeks later at the end of the program we understood – the immersive experience was intended to teach us to see ourselves as ministers, because that's how others were going to view us. They weren't going to dismiss us as "only seminary students" or "just chaplain interns." As far as the person in the hospital bed was concerned, we were ministers, and they expected us to engage with them in that capacity.

Recalling that sink-or-swim experience all those years ago, I wonder if the disciples felt anything like that when Jesus said, "Okay, fellas, go out there and preach and teach and heal. I'll see you when you get back tonight." What did they do? What did they say? How did they divide up? [Mark's gospel says they went out in pairs, but the other gospels don't say.] Who decided which villages to visit? It wouldn't have flown if the disciples tried to tell people, "You've heard of that awesome teacher Jesus? Well, I'm here in his place." No, the disciples needed to just proceed as if they *already were* what they *hoped* they would *become*.

Several years ago the Huffington Post's blog featured an article whose title encouraged readers to "Dress for the career you want, not the one you have." The author was restating some of the work done decades ago by John T. Malloy. In his books whose titles encouraged readers to "Dress for Success," Malloy shared his research which indicated that, for both men and women, one way of achieving vocational goals was to adopt the attire of the position you sought.

When I got out of college (and before I had thoughts of going to seminary) I worked for Procter & Gamble. One of my fellow salesmen loaned me Malloy's "Dress for Success" book. It wasn't too long before I got a dark blue pinstriped suit. White or blue shirts with button-down collars. Conservative striped ties. A pair of black wing-tip shoes. THAT was how a male Procter & Gamble manager dressed in those days. I was a lowly field sales rep... but I was determined to give the appearance that I had already climbed a rung or two on the corporate ladder.

Learning how to be a chaplain by... well, by being a chaplain. Dressing for the position you hope to attain. Both provide an idea about how we may approach trying to be a follower of Jesus: just proceeding as if we *are* what we *hope* to *become*.

Do we live Christ-like lives? At times, sure. All the time? Who are we kidding?

- We aspire to be patient and understanding of all people... but we get annoyed by the "newbie" who's lack of familiarity with how things work ends up inconveniencing us.
- We want to be loving and respectful... but we badmouth that person whose social or political or religious viewpoints differ so greatly from our own.
- We want to be nonjudgmental and accepting... but we disparage unfamiliar customs or behaviors or preferences that we don't understand.

As far as embodying the spirit of Jesus in our daily lives, our Disciple Report Cards would be far from displaying "straight As." We don't measure up.

But Jesus calls us to follow, nonetheless. Jesus wants us to do our best to present his love which is gracious and generous, to show his acceptance which is unconditional and merciful, to embody his forgiveness which is undeserved and thus precious beyond measure. Jesus accepts us as we are, inviting us to live into what he wants us to become.

This is true for us individually and for us as a church. We're a collection, a congregation of imperfect but sincere believers who are striving to embody the spirit of Jesus. Don't you think this anonymous poem describes us?

I think that I shall never see  
 A church that's all it ought to be;  
 A church whose members never stray  
 Beyond the straight and narrow way;  
 A church who has no empty pews,  
 Whose pastor never has the blues.  
 A church whose stewards never "stew"  
 Or shirk the job that's theirs to do.  
 Where gossips never peddle lies,  
 Or make complaints or criticize;  
 Such perfect churches there may be,  
 But none of them are known to me;  
 But still, we'll work and pray and plan  
 To make our church the best we can.

This church has no illusions of being perfect. But we move ahead as if we *already are* what we *hope to become*. And that persistence, that hope, that vision of what's possible helps us progress toward our goal.

Believing in the vision of what's possible is illustrated in a story from the College of William and Mary, founded in the colony of Virginia in 1693.

For a century and a half, this prestigious Virginia school had been a leader among American universities. Then came the Civil War. In the hard [years] of reconstruction that followed, William and Mary went bankrupt. Soon it had a deserted campus, decaying buildings and no students.

As with so many Southern schools after that tragic war, everyone wrote it off as dead. Everyone, except its president. He had given his best years to advancing the liberal arts through that school. He refused to give up now. So, every morning, [from 1881 to 1888,] President Ewell went to the deserted campus, climbed the tower of its main building, and rang the bells, calling the school to class.

He behaved *as though the school was still there*.

People thought he was crazy. Nevertheless, every day for seven years, President Ewell rang the bells at William and Mary, in defiance of the despair and hopelessness that would destroy everything he held valuable.

Eventually and miraculously, it worked. Others caught his vision. Students, teachers and money returned. Today, America's second oldest

university thrives again, because of the hope of a single man [who acted as if he was already living what he hoped to see].<sup>1</sup>

What does it look like when we live as though we already are what we hope to become? What does it look like when we see ourselves as personal agents of the love and compassion of Jesus? Preacher and professor Martin Copenhaver describes what it looks like in one church. He wrote

My cousin Pam lived alone on a small New Hampshire farm she inherited from her parents. We did not see each other often, but the contours of her face and particularly the cadence of her voice were such that you wouldn't need a DNA test to know we are related.

Another cousin told me that Pam's cancer had recurred and that death was near. How sad, I thought, to approach death alone. So I got in my car and wended my way through the serpentine roads of New Hampshire. When I got near the little town of Hebron, NH, the GPS system quit. This was one place it did not recognize. So I stopped at the small Congregational church, where I interrupted a Bible study, and asked if anyone knew where Pam Yinger lives. They all did. One member of the group accompanied me to my car to point out the road I should take.

When I got to Pam's house, the driveway was clotted with cars. Inside, there was a gentle hum of activity. I was greeted by my cousin Michael. A woman was making tea. A few others just seemed to be hanging out. One of them took me to see Pam in the living room, which was festooned with more trinkets than any flea market.

Pam and I chatted a bit. I learned that, besides my cousin, the people in the house were all from the church. They took turns throughout the day and night so she would be cared for round-the-clock. Before I left, this small handful of God's people, in a land that the GPS forgot, held hands with Pam and one another and we prayed. After I said, "Amen," Pam added her own, "Thank you, dears."<sup>2</sup>

It's not like the people of that little church in that tiny New England hamlet had achieved Christ-like perfection. What they had resolved to do, though, was to live as though they *were* what they *hoped* to *become*. And that is a good starting point for you and me, too: to live as though we already *are* the capable, faithful agents of Christ's love that we *hope* to *become*.

[sermons; se20220227; © 2022 JMF]

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Merrill, HomeTouchMinistry.com, © 2020 CRI, PO Box 9290, Canton OH 44711 © 2020 Home Packet; see also <https://giving.wm.edu/recognition/giving-societies/#:~:text=Even%20when%20the%20university%20was%20forced%20to%20close,gifts%20to%20the%20university%20in%20consecutive%20fiscal%20years,accessed%202/24/2022>

<sup>2</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, StillSpeaking: Daily Devotional July 7, 2015, [dailydevotional@ucc.org](mailto:dailydevotional@ucc.org)