

Message: Iterate Positively

Prayer:

Give me a break. "Iterate?"

Oh, friends. Let me begin by saying I'm no fool. I get that the title of today's message sounds like a third-rate business seminar, or the sort of advice you get during the kind of lunch-and-learn or retreat that ends with a sales pitch. I get it.

"Iterate Positively" is just terrible. It's terrible. It doesn't communicate at all, right? So what I have to do, now, is explain what I mean before I even explain what I mean. This is the sort of set-up that is used as an example of what not to do when you're teaching bright-eyed, hopeful seminary students. I promise that everything but the title of this message is pretty basic stuff this morning.

Iteration is a word we've heard and know. Iteration means not just a new thing, although that's how we often use it, but what it really means is a more improved version of something. The thing that's being iterated is closer to, the way it should have been all along. An iteration, in its best case, is a version of something that, when people see it, touch it, interact with it, they decide, "It's even better now. It's the way it should have been last time." So we get what an iteration is.

To iterate is to engage in ongoing iterations of something, each one building on the last. You can, I guess, iterate negatively. I don't know what that looks like, but everytime someone says, "I liked the last version better," that's what they mean. This iteration was worse, by whatever standard they're using.

Products, Systems, People:

When we talk about iterating and iterations we're usually talking about products or systems. Things, right? This kind of phone. That way HR tracks worker hours. This kind of engine or transmission.

But let's be subversive, and, in our society which treats people like things, use this word in a way that turns its meaning on its head, and we'll talk about people. We'll talk this morning about what it means to "iterate positively," as people, and as a church. What does it mean to become better all the time? What's the standard? What's the way through? That's what we're talking about this morning.

Why?

And if this series is built on things that I think are both biblical, and things that I wish I'd understood earlier in my life, then we might wonder why even include this one? I mean, isn't it sort of a given that we're supposed to become "better" all the time? It might be a given, but for a long time it wasn't for me.

Three Things:

Three things got in the way of me getting this principle, this idea of “iterating positively.” Three things on top of the fact that I had never used the word “iterate” in my life.

The first is that I didn’t have a clear sense of what “better” meant. I didn’t have a clear sense or the right idea of what I ought to aim at when it came to “iterating,” to getting better. The second is that I wasn’t good at honestly taking stock of my situation in life. You can’t iterate, move into a better version, a more perfect way of living, if you don’t know where you’re moving from. And I discounted routine faithfulness.

Let me talk about these things: Forgetting Better, Ignoring My Starting Place, and Discounting Routine Faithfulness

Forgetting “Better”: Jesus

If we’re called to “iterate positively,” then we’ve got to have some direction in mind, right? If what we’re hoping for, as we become better and better, is to get closer to what we were supposed to be all along, then it’s really straightforward to me that what we’re supposed to be is like Jesus.

Jesus--his attitudes, his character, what caught his attention, how he behaves--this is our “Good.” This is

our standard. And so “better” means, for us, getting closer to it. Our iterations are toward Jesus. I’m convinced of this, and you all know that by now. I’ve made the case dozens of times in the past years, and I’m just going to assume--because that never backfires--that we’re in agreement that Christians ought to become like Jesus as the Bible reveals him.

I know this, you know this, this is our congregation’s motto--“...becoming more like Jesus all the time.”

Forgetting Better: Other Standards?

But I have spent seasons in my walk with God when my standard wasn’t Christ. It’s okay to be honest about that, right? During those times, in the best case, I’ve, oh, tried to keep up with the Christian Joneses, turned my eyes from Jesus and turned toward those who fit some mold that I admired, but wasn’t always a Jesus-shaped mold.

But in the worst cases, I’ve simply fixed my eyes other places than Christ.

It’s very, very difficult to fix our eyes on Jesus. Our attention focuses on all sorts of other places; we fix it on all sorts of people, and they become the “good” that we seek out. Our “good” becomes someone who looks suspiciously like our mentor, or our coach, or whoever the person we have a crush on has a crush on; our “good” becomes whichever of our friends is

most popular; it becomes whoever it is we're reading lately, or hearing from all the time. Our good becomes not even the Christian Joneses, but the Joneses, period, and we seek to keep up with them by becoming like them. Our good becomes, in the reflective echo chamber of our Twitter and Instagram and Pinterest and Reddit and Facebook feeds and reads someone who looks a lot like we ourselves look. To be your own role model, your own goal, is to quit before you've begun.

It's really hard, when everyone is a potential model of how to live and what values to live by, to not let our empathy, admiration, or neediness trade Jesus as our standard for someone else.

This is made even easier when we feel as if our situation is one that, somehow, Jesus can't relate to. Is kindness as a parent different than kindness in general? Or love as a married person different than love as a single person? We want to say yes and no; "kindness is kindness everywhere, love is love everywhere," but we recognize that different relationships bring to the fore different aspects of these Spirit-given gifts and Christian virtues. So I don't want to say that we must completely ignore every role model we have, but we must be very, very cautious about which people we take our cues from. Paul can say "imitate me" and his congregations could listen to him because he was deeply, deeply intentional about

imitating Christ; most of us are not as intentional about even choosing our standards, must less making sure those people are intentional about their own faithfulness. And in the end, I do believe that if we love as Jesus loved, or show kindness as Jesus showed kindness, then the situation itself, the one we're living in, it just isn't as relevant as our commitment to consistent love, kindness, patience--whatever it may be. And in those cases when we just feel like we can't do without a standard that has lived through our exact situation, we've been given the church, to both guide us, and point us forward to Christ.

Forgetting Better: Checking In

Who is our standard of behavior? Who's life is the "good" for us that we're trying to live up to? If it's not Jesus, it's not Jesus. It's someone else. Are we okay with that and should we be?

Forgetting Better: Iteration?

Look, I get that we don't release versions of ourselves every six months. I understand to think about this thing we all go through as iteration as a weird idea. But we are always either changing, or deepening our way of life. And while we set all sorts of goals and take stock all the time about "where we want to be in life" and "what we hope to achieve in life" by this and this date, or that stage, when it comes to our finances, or our hopes for our career or the possessions that we'd like to have, we rarely sit down and think, "What is my

five year character plan?” “What do I hope to be like by the time this new year is over or my next birthday rolls around?” And yet, if we’re going to even pretend to set goals, in every area but our character, why not toss that in? Why not think, “By the time I retire I’d like to be like Jesus in this area?” “By the time the kids graduate I’d like to have built up a habit of peace and patience.”

To grow up and to grow old is to change and deepen, be continually iterating on who we have been. But in yearning to be “more like” someone else, which is common to us, we all have people we admire--in wanting to be like those we admire we have to take seriously just how much they eclipse Christ.

And we have to take seriously who we are, too.

Neglecting My Starting Place:

We start with the material at hand. When it comes to Spiritual Formation, becoming like Christ, which is what I’m talking about, when it comes to being and doing more like Christ all the time, we start with ourselves as we are, not with ourselves as we’d like to be.

Do you like gear? Most of us have hobbies of some sort or another; I pray we do, hobbies are life-giving and a grace. And every hobby comes with gear. Gear’s fun. Gear’s neat. The idea of getting gear is a

motivating thing to me, because I like things, especially things that people have thought about, and whole communities have specialized, right? Oh: You got those shoes, that brake set up, that fabric, or yarn, or manual, or text, or tool made out of that kind of metal. Nice. Gear is neat. But I have more than one pair of really nice running shoes that have basically never been run in, you know? And the reason is that I've started running many times not by, you know, running, and then getting what I need to run better, but by buying the things to run better with, and never using them. Our starts matter, where we begin matters, and beginning with the reality of our present matters, too.

And we really are terrible at self-assessment. Or no: We're good at it, we're also really good at telling ourselves that we're doing better than we are in the areas we're not doing so hot. These are subjective things, of course, because personal growth, navigating the ethical mess that's living well, being responsible to others and to yourself and cultivating character--the way these things play out in our lives is so contextualized it's a minefield to begin comparing people.

Now: we have the spirit, our consciences, Jesus' habits, all sorts of thing that externally make judgments, or help us to make internal judgments, about how we're really, actually, living. What we have to do, though, if

we're to "iterate positively," is see where we are right now. What in us is like Christ or not? What isn't. The idea of iteration implies a connection to what's gone before and it demands having a handle on what you're changing from, not simply what you're changing into.

And this is just me, not you, but when it comes to my character and what I want to be true about myself, I have often looked toward the future without looking toward the present. And you can't muscle down character change. You can't will yourself into a better--a closer to Jesus--person. Our habits, our tastes, our routines. To lurch forward without paying attention to where you're standing is like chasing after something on a slippery surface; you lurch forward and fall on your face. So, if I could go back in time to one or two or three particular moments in my life, I'd say to myself, gently, "Before you try to move forward in this great way, or live up to this great dream, or navigate this change the way you intend to, get a handle on yourself, man. You're failing in these areas. You're succeeding in these. Reckon rightly, Rich."

Starting Places: Change

All of us are facing significant changes, whether moves, career changes, periods of illness and disability, instability in the organizations we have tied ourselves to, relationships beginning and ending. Change is just, it's just *us*. It's life. But if we think the idea of becoming better, more like Jesus, than we are

matters, if “iterating positively” is compelling at all, then we have to consider how we’re doing right now.

Starting Places: Checking In

So what is our starting place? We can’t move forward into greater faithfulness tomorrow if we don’t have a handle on how we’re doing today. In what areas are we blind to our weaknesses? In what places do we deceive ourselves about our faithfulness? And what are we doing so well that all we need to do, really, is hunker down and keep on keeping on about? God will lovingly reveal these things to us, through prayer and through the Church, if we really want to know them.

Discounting Routine Faithfulness

And if you can’t get better--more good--without remembering who “good” is, and you can’t do this unless you realize where you’re starting from, and so what you need to grow in, I’ve come to realize you can’t do this unless you take really seriously the practice of routine faithfulness.

It’s fashionable, among the preaching set, to talk about how we’ve got used to instant solutions to our problems. And it’s true. We have. We are only a switch or a pill away from solving many of the problems that we have.

But we all know this isn’t the case in many areas, too: Becoming a healthier person takes work and time.

Grieving well takes work and time. Good Relationships take work and time. And changing into someone who looks ever more like Jesus, becoming more like Jesus all the time, takes work and time, too.

Routine Faithfulness: Starry-eyed

I've struggled with this, you know? I'm captivated by, oh, "big moves." When it comes to faithfulness, it's the Christians who give up everything and go to some nowhere place and die nameless, that's superstar stuff, that's what Christianity is about. I've got a little bit of martyr-at-the-ready in me, and my ideas about what to do with myself are always big ideas. And having a complex like I have isn't a sin, unless it distracts from the present and it's stuff, the stuff of living faithfully now, in the most routine of ways.

The trouble is that what makes the news--and this is as true of "Christian news" as it is any news--are the outliers. Our world teaches us to praise and attend to what's atypical, not what's typical, what's glamorous, not what's tedious. We hear Paul say "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands," and we nod, and turn on movies about superheroes. Whatever we find boring, whatever is regular to us, isn't compelling.

But it is in our boring, routine, tedious, quiet, typical lives that we prove our faithfulness and make or break our goals, especially the goal of becoming more like

Jesus, changing for the better. And I could sell this as training for some great moment, a moment of fame or heroism, right? Mother Theresa only got famous after decades of boring faithfulness, a body guard only throws him or herself in front of a bullet after years of training to reject instinct. People run toward a fire to help someone instead of away from it in fear because they've trained themselves in empathy. Heroism and the spotlight, when it comes to these things, are symptoms, side-effects of years of boring, routine, tedious, quiet practice.

But what if there is no chance to be heroic? What if there is no great moment, and the mark we leave in the world, the life we leave behind us when we pass away, is in the end not an outlier at all? There is no TED talk on how to make no splash. What if Mother Theresa had just died one day, unknown to us and the world. Would that have lessened, in God's eyes, her worth?

We want to say no, well: Let me correct myself. I want to say no, but I don't know how much I believe it, really. And that's, literally, a shame. Because God does not value celebrity and limelight; God values faithfulness. God doesn't value impact and effectiveness, God values obedience. Do celebrity, impact, limelight, effectiveness come from obedience and faithfulness: Utterly. In God's Kingdom they come from nowhere else. But again, when we take our eyes

off our standard of good, the one whom we're supposed to become like, Jesus, then it's almost certain that we've taken our eyes off the things Jesus values as well.

Routine Faithfulness: Checking in

The truth is that most of us live by and large predictable, boring, tedious lives. This is just *normal*: The outliers are outliers for a reason. But just because our lives are quiet and routine does not automatically make them faithful. And of course, from the inside the lives we have are simply the lives we have; only those on the outside are impressed by any adventure in them.

How is routine faithfulness going for us? What is getting in its way? The markers might be basic: How is prayer, how is spending time in Scripture, how is singing along with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, how is sharing life with other Christians, and choosing to be virtuous when no one sees you? But if we've let go of these, or only take part in the ones that require no difficult work to incorporate into our routine, we'll miss the mark we're aiming for.

These three things--discounting routine faithfulness, neglecting our starting places, and forgetting whose example we're trying to live up to--they disable our ability to, ahem, iterate positively. Instead we wait for

some great moment to choose for Jesus, we don't realize the uniquely personal things we need to grow in, and we imitate those who are not imitating Christ.

If we don't practice routine faithfulness, don't realize and accept ourselves as we really are, and don't keep Jesus' way of life, as Scripture presents him, in mind then there are negative consequences for us. We won't, with any consistency, be people who as we grow and change, are growing and changing into Christ. We'll still grow and change, because it's the stuff of living, but to what end, whose to say?

Assumptions:

An assumption I've made throughout this morning is that this matters. That we do want to become like Jesus, in ever greater degrees, and that we want to reflect to the world, to each other, to God the glory of Christ. Being changed by degrees into great witnesses of God's power, worth, love matters to us.

I pray we can lean into the Spirit. I pray we can avoid the traps that waylay our progress. I pray that in five or ten or 20 years we don't look back and wish that we had taken more seriously daily faithfulness, had kept our eyes more on Jesus than other shiny distracting people, or had been more honest with ourselves about where in life we needed to mature.

If we could take each these things just a little more

seriously, and give them the attention they so deeply deserve, I think we'd discover, as we grow and face the changes life brings, more blessing and peace and grateful confidence than we can imagine. It would be good for us and good for the parts of the world we do our living.