

Faith That Shows Up...Without Taking the Bait

September 27, 2026

There is a silly little series of memes making the rounds on the internet titled “How to Stop Taking the Bait: Advice from a Goose.” Now, I realize that a “goose” is not necessarily the first animal you would expect to turn to for spiritual wisdom. Geese are not exactly known for their peaceful conflict-resolution skills. And, truthfully, the advice has very little, if anything to do with geese. Nonetheless, the memes include some really good advice, including things like:

- “Let them be wrong. This is difficult but extremely peaceful. You do not have to correct every idiot with Wi-Fi.”
- “Not everything deserves a reaction. Some things are said purely to get one. Do not provide complementary entertainment.”
- “Watch the pattern. If someone keeps poking you and then acting shocked when you react, that’s probably their whole game.”

And my favorite: “Silence is very annoying, especially to people who were hoping for a performance. Give them nothing. Majestic!”

It turns out, the goose may actually have some wisdom for us.

Because that is exactly what is happening in the Gospel this morning. The chief priests and elders come to Jesus with a question: “By what authority are you doing these things?” On the surface, it sounds like a perfectly reasonable question. They want to know who gave Jesus the authority to teach, to heal, to challenge the religious establishment. But Jesus knows what they are doing. They aren’t really looking for information. They are looking for a trap. They are trying to bait him. And Jesus is having none of it.

Instead of answering their question, he asks them one of his own: “Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Suddenly the people who came expecting to put Jesus on the defensive find themselves having a conversation they desperately do not want to have. They huddle together and calculate the possible answers. If they say John was from God, Jesus will ask why they didn’t believe him. If they say John was merely human, they are afraid of the crowd. So, they finally give the most politically convenient answer possible: “We don’t know.”

Jesus’ response then is, “Fair enough. If you’re not going to answer my question, I’m not going to answer yours.” It is a pretty masterful example of refusing to take the bait.

But then Jesus does something even more interesting. He doesn’t just walk away. He tells them a story. A father asks two sons to go work in the vineyard. The first says no. But then, somewhere along the way, he changes his mind and goes. The second says yes. But then he never actually goes. Then Jesus asks the question: Which one did the will of the father?

Rather than taking the bait, Jesus has shifted the conversation. The question is no longer the esoteric, “On whose authority do I act,” but rather, “Am I doing God’s work?”

That is where this Gospel meets us this morning as we just baptized Evelyn. We said some beautiful things. We made promises. We spoke about God’s love and grace.

But baptism also asks something of us beyond our words. It asks us to show up. That is what baptism does. It takes something we believe and makes it tangible. We put water on a person's head. We speak their name. We make promises out loud. We gather around them and say, in effect, "You belong here. You are part of us," but then we as a community promise to show up.

That is where I think this Gospel and Evelyn's baptism and our annual pledge campaign all dovetail so powerfully. Our theme this fall is "Faith That Shows Up." Not faith that merely talks. Not faith that looks impressive from a distance. Faith that shows up. Because that is what Jesus seems to care about in this parable. The two sons represent two different ways of being religious. One says the right thing and then doesn't show up. The other doesn't look like what the religious establishment expects, but eventually gets up, walks out to the vineyard, and gets to work. Jesus is very clear about which one actually lived out the father's wishes.

That doesn't mean words don't matter. Of course they do. But words are not the whole story. Our actions tell the truth about what we value. That is true in our relationships. It is true in our families. It is true in our communities. And it is true in our faith. If we say that every person is made in the image of God, what does that look like when a neighbor is hungry? If we say that everyone deserves dignity, what does that look like when someone doesn't have a home? If we say that God's table is wide enough for everyone, what does that look like when somebody arrives carrying a story or an identity or a life experience that challenges us? If we say that Jesus calls us to love our neighbors, what does that love actually require of us?

Those are stewardship questions.

Now I know the word, stewardship, can sometimes make our eyes glaze over. We hear "stewardship" and think pledge cards and budgets and spreadsheets and fundraising goals. And while those are important, biblical stewardship is so much bigger than money. Stewardship is the question: What are we going to do with what God has entrusted to us? Our time, our gifts, our energy, our attention, our compassion, our creativity, yes our money, but even more so our very lives.

What are we going to do with all of it? Because if we say that this community matters, then today's Gospel is reminding us that what we say needs to become action. It has to show up somewhere. All of you know that it does. Faith shows up here every week. It shows up in the people who teach our children and wrangle our youth. It shows up in the people who sing and play and usher and greet. It shows up in the people who make meals, visit the sick, answer phones, organize ministries, wash dishes, unlock doors, tend the building, balance the books, write the newsletter, and quietly notice when someone hasn't been here for a while. It shows up in our Community Conversation on Homelessness this coming Wednesday.

It shows up when we decide that our faith cannot remain safely contained inside these walls. And it shows up in something as ordinary and as consequential as putting a pledge in an envelope or making an electronic commitment to support this congregation for another year.

Making a pledge is one way we say: I believe the ministry this church does matters, and I want to help make it possible. Pledging is one way our words become deeds.

That's one reason this Gospel is so fitting for the beginning of a pledge campaign. Because Jesus is asking will we show up? Will we take the love we have received and put it somewhere? Will we take the values we proclaim and embody them? Will we take the grace that has been poured over us—like the water of baptism—and let that grace flow outward into the world?

As we begin this year's pledge campaign, it's important for me to note that our church doesn't ask you to approach giving from a place of guilt or fear. In fact, our treasurer, Larry Rose, might be frustrated with me when I say I don't even want us to begin by asking, "What can I afford to give?"

I want us to begin with a different question:

- What do I believe is worth showing up for?
- What do I believe is worth my time?
- What do I believe God is calling me to do with my energy?
- What do I believe is worth my generosity?
- What kind of church do I want to help create?
- What kind of community do I want to help build?
- With Jesus as our exemplar, what kind of a world can we build together?

And then, having asked those questions, we can decide what it means for each of us to show up. Because that is what faith looks like. Not perfection. Not having all the answers. Not winning every argument. Not taking every piece of bait that gets dangled in front of us.

Sometimes faith means knowing when to walk away. And sometimes faith means walking toward something. Toward the vineyard. Toward the hungry. Toward the lonely. Toward the frightened. Toward the unhoused person in the park. Toward the child. Toward the person who needs to know that they belong. Toward the work God has placed in front of us.

Today, in baptism, we made promises about the kind of community we want to be. May those promises become more than words. May we put flesh on them, action behind them, so that they become the way we live together, the way we show up in the world.

Because this is what faith does: it shows up.

Alleluia and Amen.

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