

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
February 13 & 14, 2016
John Crosby
A Welcoming On-Ramp | 1 Corinthians 9:21-23

We're here in the middle of a winter's series, the fifth week of a series we're calling Imagine Church. We're celebrating our sixtieth anniversary beginning with the idea of reimagining what could happen at 70th and 100 if we became the kind of church that God hoped would happen here. Imagine that church. We started off with the idea that this church is like churches everywhere. It has the same foundation that is found in the Book of Acts. When the church begins, they say there are four things that every church has in common if it wants to be faithful. It says they—the apostles and the 3,000 who came to Christ on Pentecost Sunday—devoted themselves to:

- the teaching of the apostles—the Scriptures
- the fellowship—that is, coming together to encourage one another
- the breaking of bread—that is the sacraments: worship, the Lord's Supper, and baptism
- prayer

The church is founded on those four things and cannot be the church *anywhere* unless those four things happen. But all churches don't look alike. Churches that do those four things do not look alike, because over time we come to value different things. We thought if we wanted to imagine what God would do here, it would be important for us to rediscover and refresh our values. So, that's what we've been doing these last four weeks. We started this series by saying that if you look at CPC, one of the things you would recognize is there is a fundamental love here for all generations. We focus on all generations because we believe that the spiritual journey of a 90-year-old is as important as that of a 9-year-old is as important as a 9-week-old that we baptize. We focus on all generations. That makes us a little different than some churches and that leads to the second value. If you remember, John Ortberg came from sunny California. He was a little bitter that he got here on the coldest weekend of the year, but he came and he talked to us out of his book *All the Places You'll Go*. He says you have no idea of the limitless possibilities that God has in front of you, and we resonated with that because we said our second value is to have a spirit of possibility. What could God make possible? What's the next new thing, the next entrepreneurial, the next risky thing that God wants us to do together? We are a community that likes to look and say *what could happen?*

The third value we talked about two weeks ago. We looked at a society that is so divided, so contentious about everything. Did it seem to you that Judge Scalia's body was not even cold before they were fighting viciously about the nominations? And that marks our society. The grace though, to this whole weekend for me, was to be reminded of the wonderful friendship between Justice Scalia—very conservative, very Catholic—and Justice Ginsburg—very Jewish, very liberal. They would fight like cat and dog and then go to the opera together. We don't see that because we don't live in the tension; we push each other away. We say if we're going to be a community that God speaks to, we need to learn to live in the tension, to stay together when we disagree, to offer each other humility, and listening, and together try to discover what biblical convictions look like in the 21st century. A willingness to live in the tension because we believe God's grace is more important than my interpretation.

What we talked about last week, the fourth of the values, I thought was just great. I watched it on Livestream from Bangkok, Thailand. I thought Debbie Manning and the Lay Care group did a phenomenal job saying that at the very heart of this church, and frankly the entry way for many people in our community, is to discover that we have a huge value on tangible care and hospitality, at good times and especially at hard times, that can seem like it has the extravagant nature of our Savior. Whether that is at baptisms, or funerals, weddings, or second grade Bibles, we want to have hospitality and care mark us as a people.

Today is another value. It's the only value that we changed the title of. When we heard it we said *we like what it says, but not the way it's said*. The original title of this value was that we would be a church that had convictions without rigidity. Now, I think that's pretty clear. We want to have clear biblical convictions, humbly expressed—solid convictions—but we don't want to be rigid and say *if you don't use the right words you can't be part of the club*. We thought that felt a little too negative. What we wanted to do was to Imagine Church. Imagine a church that would be like this where somebody would say, "I grew up Catholic, but I'm not anymore", "I went to a Lutheran Church, but now I don't go anywhere", "I don't know anything about Jesus", "I've never been in a Bible study." Like everybody, you come from somewhere different. We believe the only thing that should matter here is how Jesus is changing your story now. It's not about having the right words. You're invited—there's that word again—you're invited to go at your own pace with no pressure to fit a mold, to know all the right phrases. Can we imagine a church where it's safe? It's safe to start the journey with Jesus wherever you really are, not where you pretend to be, but where you really are. What would that look like? Well, we tried to look back to when people first started to follow Jesus, and we wondered, what did it look like then? When they started to gather together, what did it

look like then? And I came across a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to a small group of Jesus followers in Greece in Corinth. Paul says this:

“To those outside the law I became a fellow outsider, so as to win those outside the law.” [1 Corinthians 9:21]

In other words, to those who are not Jews, who didn't get the Ten Commandments with Moses like I did, they're on the outside of the law. I'm on the inside, Paul says. *I know God, God knows me, God's loved me from the start. Jesus was a Jew. He was on the inside.* Paul says, *to those outside the law, I become a fellow outsider.* He steps outside to be like them.

“I'm not free from God's law, but I am now under the law of Christ. ²²To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³I do all this for the Good News of Jesus, so I may share in its blessings.” [1 Corinthians 9:21-23]

That's the value we want to have here. To become all things to all people that God might save some, and we've decided to call this value a “welcoming on-ramp”. A welcoming on-ramp because following Jesus can start from anywhere if we let it. I added that “if we let it” because I think the church often doesn't let it. I think the church often stinks with people who don't know Jesus. I think the problem is that churches want to help people clean up their act and Jesus is not about cleaning up your act. Jesus said the most important thing to do is to catch the fish, *then* you can clean the fish. You people want to clean the fish before you catch the fish. Who wants to be “caught”? So Jesus serves people before He is served. He loves people before He gets anything back. He invites people to follow Him, which means that Jesus always goes first instead of pushing us out the door. That's an invitation. Come, all of you that are heavy burdened. Come, follow Me. It's an on-ramp into the kingdom of heaven.

I think that the right words are really important, don't get me wrong, I'm a words guy. The right words are very important in the long run, but first people need to hear the tune. If they don't like the tune, they won't listen to the words. Don't you think that's what Pope Francis has done? Pope Francis really hasn't changed the words, but he's changed the tune. So, when people hear the Catholic Church coming, they might see it as an on-ramp instead of a stiff arm.

Now, I was no great loss to the church. I walked away with some encouragement from

them, and when I decided that there really was a God, I did not need a church at all to make me realize that I was a sinful person. I didn't need the church to help me feel bad about hurting others, about hurting myself. In spite of how much I was trying to be a good guy, I didn't need a church to tell me how bad I was. What I needed desperately was a different way to live. I needed a church that showed me glimpses of what life could be. A life of compassion, and justice, and service, and mercy, and joy. Where people would say to me, "Hey come on, join us. We don't have our act together, join us." Learn to trust the Jesus that we're discovering. *That* will change your life, not us.

So, I found this group of people my age, a little bit older, and I was invited in, and people made me comfortable. It didn't matter that I didn't know the songs. Sue Payne and I laugh because we went to the same college. I went to this college because I was just barely a Christian; I didn't know anything about Christianity. I learned all the hymns at this college. It was a long time before I know that God's last name was not damn. That comes across as a joke, but the reality is that you can either feel invited or you can feel judged.

Dallas Willard says, "The primary function of the church is not evangelism. The primary function of the church is to be a place for the dwelling of God on earth." Where God comes and He changes us because He lives among us. He goes on, "The question is, how does the church do REAL evangelism? How do you share the Good News today?" And Willard said, "You don't bang them over the head with a tract. You ravish people with the blessings of the Kingdom of God, and make them hungry for it." Salvation is not just deliverance from guilt or life in the sweet by and by. The church has always tried to control who gets in and who stays out, but that's not the church's job. At all. We are here to build on-ramps into the kingdom of heaven, to the God of grace. I love that, but what could that look like? What *does* that look like? We asked a bunch of people how they felt on-ramped and in two minutes here's what they told us.

Welcoming On-Ramp Video: <https://vimeo.com/155534067>

You know what I loved? I loved how many different ways there were; how many different on-ramps had been created. Kind of funny . . . after the service last night, one of the people who had been in the service said, "Hey John, you know what? I recognize one of those people. I invited that person to come. Our band was playing one night in a bar and we struck up this conversation and I said, 'Well, you ought to come to church.'" I said, "Only in Minnesota!" The apostle Paul said, "I become all things to all people all the time. I make everyone feel welcome and find ways to draw them in so that some may be saved." That's why we say that one of our core values is to provide on-ramps

that encourage people to come in. Not to come to church, but to come to the living, loving God.

What does an on-ramp do—you know what it does on a highway—but what does an on-ramp do in a church? Let me suggest these things. The first thing that an on-ramp does is that it says to busy people: *things can change. It doesn't have to stay like this. Get off the highway, get off the rat race, you may be going the wrong way, and you're going too fast.* An on-ramp says things can change. In the same way, I believe that on the bottom of an on-ramp there is a welcome sign: *We're so glad you're here. Come on in!* It does NOT have a *say the right password to get in.* We don't want that. As our society becomes more and more diverse, and skeptical, and cynical, people feel pushed away even when they're not feeling pushed away. Unless we actively invite people, welcome people, make people feel safe, and beloved, they feel pushed away. We need welcome signs in the forms of people.

The third thing that an on-ramp does in church is that on-ramps offer hope for the journey no matter how hard the journey is for somebody at that time. They offer hope for the journey...and grace. We live in a “show me the money” culture. We need a grace note. That's what an on-ramp does. That's what we pray this church will do better and better. Sometimes we stink at it. Sometimes people come up to us and say, “You know, I've been here three years and I haven't felt welcomed at all. You people are all so friendly, but I can't get in.” We need to work on that. In the same way that this is so important, we will rarely build an on-ramp for the unique purpose, the sole-purpose of evangelism, so that we can tell the bad folks on the outside how good it is on the inside. We don't think that works very well. We want to do something life-giving and invite other people to join us. So when we do baptisms, we believe that lifts up life. It shows how much God loves children *and* great, great-grandparents. It's an on-ramp to the kid to come in, to their parents to say “welcome”, and to anybody who watches and wonders if there's a place for them here...if there's a place for their kids. We want to say “yes”! That's an on-ramp, but another on-ramp might look very different. Usually an on-ramp should not be *hey why don't you come to church with me*; usually an on-ramp is getting them to move in the right direction. For instance, last spring we decided we would invite a comedian, Michael Jr., to come here. We thought we'd have 400-600 people come and listen to this guy, and 1,500 people flooded the room—this room, the room out there...it was a riotous, fun, life-giving time because Michael was laughing at us and helped us laugh at ourselves. It was an on-ramp. People think, *I'll come to a church that's like this.* It's an on-ramp when this spring, Dee McIntosh, our domestic missions pastor, helps us pack a million seeds that we can send all the way to Africa for one of our partners in Zambia, so that Zambian farmers can make their own food instead of always getting it from us. Let's give them seeds and help to grow their own food. It's an on-ramp because when you do that packing, it's a great thing for 80-year-olds and

8-year-olds. It's an easy invite. C'mon. You wouldn't even say you're going to church; you're going to this place and we're going to help people in Africa. It's an on-ramp.

I saw an on-ramp on Friday. I came in, picked some stuff up, and realized that there was a service going on in the Sanctuary. I came in and Rich was leading a service for a young man who had died of a brain tumor. He was invited into our community by another person with a brain tumor who said, "You ought to come. Bring your family". So the man and his wife and his two teenagers came, and they sat in our community for a while and they got loved. The dad joined a small group and the small group had another guy who was dying in that small group, and one day the small group went to the hospice and sat around the bed with this guy and prayed him into heaven. And when they walked out the door, Brian turned to Rich Phenow and said, "You know, when it's my time, I want to come here with you guys." He died this last weekend, but not alone, because someone had offered an on-ramp to that family and now we are able to encourage and give love together. But what if he hadn't been invited? An on-ramp is a man sitting in his first small group, not sure if he's going to like it at all, and hearing other people share things about themselves that he'd never share, and then saying, "Man do I need a place like this where I can be honest." But an on-ramp isn't just limited to adults. Our high school group built an on-ramp by going over to Friendship Village and hugging elderly people. It made their week. In the same way, our Mosaic service (special needs kids who worship and lead worship together) went over to 7500 York and they had a sing-along together. They sang, the older people sang, they sang together. And one mom had brought her kid to Mosaic for the very first time and they said *oh we're not meeting here, we're going over to 7500 York*. She went with them and on the way back she said, "I think we want to come to this church. We want to find a place here for our little girl at Tapestry and at Mosaic." It's an on-ramp to life. Our kids in Sunday school today, this weekend, are filling out a card and the card is "See you at church. Join us" and they're writing at the top, "Dear . . . (who you're going to invite) come to church with us." If you teach kids young that it's great to share the joy of God, they do it. They love it.

What's the next on-ramp that this community needs to create? I don't know—you tell me. You tell me. What should we be doing next? What way can we show people that God does not live here, but God's people want to love here? How can we do that in life-giving ways? Some of you will find that out easily. Some of you are natural on-ramp builders. You love projects and say, "Let's do this. And let's do it big and wild and let's put up signs all over the community." Some of you are on-ramp builders. God bless you—we need more of you. And some of you would say, "I don't think that's me." And you know there are others of you who are natural inviters, you are gifted inviters. Remember on the video the woman said, "Yeah, I'm just in a clothing store and this woman says, 'You ought to come to my church.'" Some of you would not do that if you

were the only person in the room. The idea of that kind of outreach is foreign to you and that's fine. Those of you who are inviters should invite, but those of you who don't feel like that's your gift, who are a little more shy, should see that the most important thing is to be invited and just as important is what happens when they come. We need inviters and we need welcomers. You can be a welcomer. You know what it's like to sit and watch everybody talk to each other when you go out in the Great Room and you can look for somebody who looks like they don't fit in and make them an on-ramp. It's a hugely important task.

Let me finish with Valentine's Day. Some of you have probably read the historical term "plundering the Egyptians". It comes from a biblical phrase, from a time when the Israelite slaves are leaving Egypt and they are called to plunder the Egyptians. The plagues have come and they're finally out of Egypt. God tells them to take the gold and the silver and all the precious stuff out of the houses of their Egyptian masters and to let the Egyptians know this is what God wants. So, they plunder the Egyptians and ran away with their gold. That's the biblical term. The idea is that you take what is precious to another culture and you use it for a different purpose. So, Christmas was a Pagan holiday and Christians came and plundered the Egyptians, saying *let's celebrate the birth of Jesus on this day*. Plundering the Egyptians.

Valentine's Day is plundering the Egyptians in reverse. It's celebrating a Christian sign in a very Pagan way. It's losing the Christian flavor and going back to a different story. You guys all remember from high school who Valentine was, right? I'm sure I could ask any one of you and you would say, "Sure!" Valentine was a Roman priest who lived in the 250-260s AD under Claudius II of Rome. Remembering now? It's coming back to you? Yeah, yeah, this is there. Claudius II was one of those who frequently had persecutions against the Christians and did all he could to strengthen the army of Rome. One of the things that Claudius did to strengthen the army of Rome was to insist, to make a decree, that no young man could be married because he believed that married soldiers were more cautious than unmarried soldiers. The married soldiers were worried for their lives because of what would happen to their wives and their children. He said, "I don't want that, so nobody gets married." Now that was not as big of a deal in that culture as you might think because that culture back then, filled with all kinds of sexual immorality and confusion, was just as Pagan as our culture, where it doesn't matter whether you're married or not. And into that mix comes Valentine. He's a priest and people began to be attracted to this Jesus person. They begin to come in on the on-ramps into the church and they saw that the Christians would marry one another. They would marry one-to-one for life, and Christians would say *this is what God wants...one man, one woman, one life. It's a blessing. It's sacred. And it's encouraged even if the Emperor says no*. So after the edict, Valentine starts marrying people inside the church in secret. He marries them quietly because it's against the law now.

Eventually Valentine is caught, he's imprisoned, he's tortured, and he is killed for performing marriage ceremonies against the command of Emperor Claudius. But today, nobody celebrates St. Claudius Day, and nobody can forget St. Valentine's Day because of the Christian view of love as commitment. Life was modeled in front of people and they were given a chance to experience it and they said, "I want that." Remember Dallas Willard? "You should ravish them with the blessings of the kingdom so that they say, 'I want that!'" And people said, "I want that kind of love." Valentine gave people an example of what real love could look like, an on-ramp, and they said, "I want that!" Let's do it again, today.

Lord God, I thank You that the very first people who followed Jesus weren't concerned with being right. They said they wanted to become all things to all people all the time, so that some might be saved. Saved not by the right words, but by love that will not let them go. Help us to usher people into the kingdom of heaven that they might be forgiven and restored. That they might be shown what love and mercy, justice and peace can look like. And send us out into that world to draw others to You. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit, we bless You. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.