

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
September 2 & 3, 2017
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Trending: #livingbeyondthetrend**

I had a professor in school who said, "You can almost never start well a new chapter unless you end well the chapter that just finished." He was saying that the way you end really influences what comes next. Now, we are just about to jump into another academic year. We talk about our year being January to December, but most of our lives revolve around this academic-year pattern of life. Labor Day marks that transition for us to jump back in, and I'm really excited about what's coming ahead. Some of you are going on trips around the world—I see a group back there that's going to head out around the world this next week. Some of you are jumping into a new phase of work or life, career or school. How you begin, in good part, depends on how you're ending.

This last month we've been talking about trends that affect our lives and our society, and how do those trends—whether it's the silly image of a flip phone or something that's as huge as the Internet—how do they affect our faith? And so it seemed to us important to end that well as we start out new, having learned fresh ways that God can speak to us in a changing world. So I'm going to ask you, as I review quickly these four weeks, which of them spoke to you most? You might remember we talked about the idea that one of the biggest trends is in the area of social media—how these days we often will text people in the very same room with us, that most of our news and most of our relationships are magnified by the voices of Facebook, and Twitter, and Snapchat, and Instagram—and it changes the way we communicate. In the midst of that we said the intersection of faith and trend is to remember that there are very real people at the other end. So much of what is said online would never be said face to face, and we reminded one another that what we put out there reveals what kind of person is really in here.

We put this series together at the beginning of the summer, and I think it was the providence of God that in the second week we moved from talking about social media to social discord, because Rich got up to speak to us four days after the events of Charlottesville where race, and anti-Semitism, and clashes showed how we were being pulled apart. Rich said that the key is not to hide from the fight, but to engage in a way that shows your faith. He said, "For the Christian, social conflict must always get personal. Otherwise, you're just throwing bombs over the wall. But, when it gets personal, when conflict becomes personal for the follower of Jesus, we see people on the other side as children of God, and we treat them with love and respect. Are we doing that in our society today?"

The third week we had a group of our staff talk about the idea that as a church, we want to be growing young. As a whole, the church is growing old. The Boomers are going off to sea and attention is beginning to focus on the Millennials, who see life very differently. We said that to grow young, a church that wants to be for all generations has to find ways to have young voices involved in the leadership. That's why people like Van are so essential to our life together as we go forward. How can we inspire their faith?

Last week seemed a little different, but we had Dana Allin, the head of fledging denomination, ECO, come and talk to us. He asked, "In a world where church attendance is declining and denominations are dying, why did we start a new denomination?" And he said that the trend here is not always what you think; it may be good that people aren't coming to church anymore just because it's the thing to do. He said, "When the church moves from the mainstream—it's just what everybody does—out to the margins, it has a chance to become more of a movement than an institution, and God always works on the move."

So, of those four trends, which spoke to you? Was it about media or church? Was it about the different generations or how we fight one with another? Let me give you a summary. If I tried to summarize the whole transition of trend and faith, I would quote what Os Guinness once said: "The one who marries the spirit of the age awakes a widow in the morning." In other words, if my life is for the latest phone, the latest clothing, the latest job, the latest political fad, I'm marrying the spirit of the age, but it's shelf life means it's dead in the morning. And I'm not only out of step, but I've lost touch with what's really important. If you put it another way, marrying the spirit of the age and waking up a widow in the morning . . . put it another way: changes that come quickly, trends that change in our world force us to say, "What do I really believe when I'm being pulled in a different direction? What do I really believe?" And with the black pastor we say, "Unless you stand for something, you'll fall for anything." What do you stand for that means you won't just fall for the latest thing to come around the block?

I want to be with a group of people who aren't worried about the future. Christians shouldn't be Luddites. You remember what Luddites were? They were the people in England who made fabric and then, all of a sudden, looms came and they made fabric faster than a hundred people could do it in their houses. The workers hated the machines so they went and broke the looms. It was a protest against progress. That's not the way Christians . . . Christians aren't worried about the future because we know how the story ends. And we don't make a god out of progress, but we don't resist change either.

Let me give you an example of that. How can you, this school year, understand these trends and know what you're supposed to be doing? When things come to

a crossroad, the trends usually demand that you change the way you've been acting all along. That happened when the transition between the first and the second king of Israel came about. Most people think that David was the first king of Israel, but really, the first king of Israel was a huge guy named Saul. God sent Samuel, the prophet, to anoint Saul and he starts out great. Then he becomes proud. Then he becomes desperate. And then, frankly, he probably goes insane, goes a little crazy at the popularity of this young upstart David. He chases David all the way around the country, sending him out in exile, fleeing for his life. What happens at the end of Saul's life? When he dies in battle, his son Jonathan died as well. So you'd think, "Well, maybe it's time for David to come." But what happened? Saul had been the king for 25 years. He has in place a general, a secretary of state, a captain of the guard, a director of taxes. All of these people are going, *Whoa. If a new king comes, what happens to us?* And so they want to keep the monarchy that Saul installed, and they're determined to hold onto power. In the meantime, there are other people who say, "But David. But David." How are you going to choose? The one you know, crazy as he was, or the one that ran away, neat as he was?

What the story shows can teach us about trends. The story is told in the Books of Samuel and the Books of Chronicles and the Books of Kings. But in Chronicles, what happens at this transition time is that each tribe—there are 12 tribes in Israel—each tribe tries to decide who they're going to support, Saul or David. And some of them are big—the tribe of Judah, the tribe of Benjamin, the Levites. And then there are tiny tribes, and one of the tiniest is somebody you've never heard before—the tribe of Issachar. And as they're trying to decide to go with Saul or to go with David, this is what it says about the people of Issachar.

And then there were the leaders of Issachar. Only 200 in number, less than 10,000 in the whole tribe, only 200 in number, who understood the times and knew what the Lord wanted them to do. [1 Chronicles 12]

That's how you deal with trends. You understand the times and you figure out what God wants you to do. They worked at that. Go with Saul. Go with David. Saul's the safe choice; the army is already in place. David is an unknown commodity, but he seems so good. Which way do you go? How do you understand the times? And so the leaders of Issachar met together and they probably said something like, "Well, which leader can we trust more? Saul's successors or David?" Who you follow is mostly a matter of character, isn't it? Saul looked like a king, David did not. But Saul, it was always about Saul. Doesn't seem like it was that for David. He made it about his people. One of them would say, "Didn't David go crazy out there? Remember?" There was a time when David the shepherd boy was chased out into the surrounding country, and he pretended to be crazy in front of the new king just to save his life. And they say, "No. No. That was just an act." Somebody else would say, "You know who

really went crazy? It was Saul. It was not 'My way or the highway.' It was, 'My way or you die.' I want to follow a leader that can be trusted and not a crazy king." So, then they asked themselves, "Well, what path will lead us to peace instead of to war? Not just civil war—David against Saul's people." But they are surrounded by enemy nations that want to kill them. And one of them probably said, "Oh, you remember? Remember what a great leader Saul was and how he led us to victory after victory?" And another one would say, "Yeah, but remember that song we sang? 'Saul killed his thousands, but David has killed tens of thousands.' If it's safety we want, we should go with the guy who wants peace but can win in war." As a matter of fact, part of this discussion was happening because David said, "I feel called by God, but I am not going to bring war to my own people. If you don't want me as king, I'm not coming." They said, "That's the guy we want to be our king."

And thirdly, these men and women of Issachar probably said, "What will honor this God that the prophet Samuel has been talking about for 40 years? Didn't He bring us Saul?" And another guy would say, "He did bring us Saul, but when Saul messed up, He went to David's house, and had David's dad trot out all of his sons. He discovered David out taking care of the sheep. The reason I love David," this elder says, "is because when we won the war . . . Remember? We won that war, the army came back into Jerusalem, and David wasn't sitting up on that throne. He was with his troops, and he was dancing. And he said, 'It's not about me. It's about the God that gave us victory.' I'll never forget that dance." And it says the people of Issachar understood the times and knew what God wanted them to do. That's what I want for you.

When the iPhone 9 comes out, do you need it? Maybe. Maybe not. When the next racial flare-up happens, how are you going to respond? What is God calling you to do in this new setting? Let me offer you a few ways that, like the people of Issachar, help you understand the times, and then let's figure out what God wants us to do. Three of them.

The first one is that there is a trend in our world about how we get our information, and people who follow God need to understand. In our world, people get information in niches. It's a niche-oriented news cycle. In other words, people don't listen to Walter Cronkite; everybody doesn't hear the same thing. That's the way it is. A third of you listen to Fox, a third of you listen to MSNBC, and a third of you listen to CNN, and they're all giving conflicting streams of information. And if you're younger, you get almost all your information on social media. It is imperative that the people of God not only know what the information is, but how trustworthy it is and what the other side is saying. Part of this trend, for those of you who would try to understand what is eternally important, is that our news cycle has shortened and narrowed. It's shortened. It goes *boom, boom, boom,*

and it's narrowed to focus on one thing. So, this last week, it's been all Harvey, all the time. Devastating, but certainly not the only thing that's happening. And then what happens is that when you narrow the spotlight, it provides a dizzying and obsessive perspective so that Harvey dominates and that shoves aside all of Charlottesville. And Charlottesville interrupted our concerns about North Korea, but North Korea jumped on the stage and made us forget about Russia. And Russia made us completely stop talking about healthcare. Does anybody remember healthcare? And healthcare, for a time, made us forget that conditions in Syria have not changed. When we go like this, we get amnesia. What will you choose to remember?

The second thing that I'd say people of God tend to look at differently is how we make our living. Not just how we get our information, but how we make our living. They would observe the trend that, in our society, it's not all bad news. People are always trying to tell you, "Oh, the future is terrible." The future's not terrible. One of the good things that's happened in our society is we have an increasing number of people who are not living in order to work. Their work is not their obsession; they will not have to work until they die. They will not determine whether they are a success or a failure depending on how far they get up the corporate ladder. And you see that at both ends of the spectrum. You see more and more people saying, "I know there's a new chapter for me. I'm only 52 or 67. I have another thing to do, and it doesn't equate to the paycheck that I've been getting the last 40 years." A different view of work also happens at the other end, where young people are very determined not to obsess about work the way so many of the Boomers have. And they have this crazy word called "boundaries." They will do things that are life giving or important outside the paycheck, even if that interrupts the ambition. I think this is a good trend that we need to look at.

Another side of how we make our living that faith-filled people should be aware of is that there's an increased fear around financial security. Important we celebrate the value of labor, but this Labor Day, the top 1 or 5 or 10 percent thrives. The middle 80 percent stagnates and struggles, and the bottom 20 or 30 percent lives on entitlements that are huge compared to anywhere else and smaller than these people think they need to get out of the pit. One of the results of that strain is that everybody feels like they're getting screwed, speaking theologically. The bottom feels like, "How can I get a job if I don't have childcare?" "How can I get to work if I don't have transportation?" The middle says, "How can I keep my job at the factory if you keep shutting the factories?" "How can you let all these people come in and work for so little that I can't maintain a healthy wage?" And the people who are coming in are saying, "Hey. I'm just trying to get a job here." The people at the top say, "I'm so tired of having worked so hard my whole life to get ahead and, somehow, I'm to blame for this." So, each part of the pie is saying, "It's their fault!" Where do the followers of Jesus come into the idea that how we

make our living must reflect what our values are?

Let me give you one more. If I were looking at trends today, I'd say part of it is about information, part of it is about economics (money), and part of it is about values. And again, where do you get your values? Are they following the trends of our society, because our society has changed enormously. One of those changes would be an erosion of a moral consensus. We used to have a fairly clear idea of what was right and what was wrong. Instead, we have replaced that with . . . there is a verse from the time where there were no kings in Israel that said, "And each person did what was right in their own sight, and it led to chaos." That's some of what we have now. Each one does what's right in our sight. The only thing you can't do is say that anybody else is wrong. That is not tolerance. Tolerance is where I have views about what is right and wrong and I learn to treat people with whom I disagree with civility and with respect. That's tolerance. What we have instead in our society is a compulsion to support every choice that does not physically hurt someone else, and that leads those who believe that God speaks to us to work harder than ever to forge some kind of agreement. Are you just standing up for your side, or are you working for agreement?

Again, it's not all bad news. I think that in this area of values one of the things that has been good—messy but good—is that there has been a heightened awareness of justice. We are no longer as complacent about issues of race. We are no longer willing to just shuffle off and let the next group deal with economic inequities. We feel like we need to drag out into the open issues that are messy and about which we are conflicted, and instead of hiding them, our young and our not so young are saying, "God is a God of justice."

So, they understood the times. They figured out how to trust their information, how to make their living, and how to discern their values. We need to do what the leaders of Issachar did—understand the times and know what God wants us to do. You know what? That first 20 minutes, it's just a lecture. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. Okay. Okay. But what difference does it make? Or, as a friend of mine says, "Yes, but how?" How does that actually happen in your life? How do you understand, accept this, distrust this, resist that, and figure out what God wants you to do?

One of the treats in Laura's and my life is that we have been brought into the edges of Billy Graham's world and have gotten to know the family. And through knowing Dr. Graham's family, we've heard some of the stories of somebody who tried to understand the times. Billy Graham started his crusades at a time of technological revolution, and he jumped on the technology. He used loudspeakers. Then he used radio. Then he used newspapers. Then he used systems that would take people from the crusades into the churches. He worked

the trends. He understood the times. But then it says, "He also knew what the Lord wanted him to do." The crusades started to grow by thousands and tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands, and one of the reasons they worked was that everywhere Dr. Graham went, before he came, he would gather all the churches, all the church pastors of Nashville, or Seattle, or Los Angeles, or New York, or Chicago, or wherever, and he would say, "Let's do this together. I'm not coming to take your people. Let's do this together." And African-American, and Baptist, and Hispanic, and Episcopal pastors would come together for the first time and they would be enthused. And each of these campaigns got bigger than the last. Then Dr. Graham goes to a place in the southwest, and the chair of the local pastor association says, "This is great. We're going to have to have a huge, colored section and a huge section for the rest of us." And Dr. Graham says, "I'm sorry. We have a problem here. There are no colored sinners. There are no white sinners. There's only one section. In the kingdom of God, there's only one section." And he said, "Unless everybody sits scattered throughout, I won't come." And he was part of the movement that said, "Segregation is an evil that must be brought into the light of the kingdom of heaven." Not politics, but kingdom values. He saw the trends, and he saw through the trends to the eternal. He lived beyond the trends. How are you going to do that this year?

I think the only way that you're going to know if a trend is good or not is if you keep the main thing the main thing. In your life, if you're in school, what's the main thing? If you keep the main thing the main thing, the little stuff will take care of itself. But what's the main thing for you? Well, the Prophet Micah told us what the main thing was. He said, "Isn't this what the Lord requires of you—to love justice, to do mercy, and to walk humbly before your God." That's the main thing. That's why we're here. We want to learn to love justice, we want to learn to have mercy, we want to learn to walk humbly with our God. And, if we do that, we'll see the trends differently. I think it all starts with the end of the sentence, though—that we will walk humbly with our God. The keyword there, the unusual word, is to walk "humbly." We walk proudly with our God. We're the ones who've got it figured out. We're Christians. And the Muslims, and the Jews, and the atheists, they're just wrong. Does that sound like we're walking humbly with our God? It doesn't mean that you don't have convictions; it means you have humility and civility. When we lead with humility, we lead differently. Coming up we are going to study Moses for nine weeks, and one of the reasons I love Moses is that the Bible says, "Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth." Remember, he didn't even like to talk, but he loved to listen. He didn't put other people's ideas down; he learned from them. Will you and I walk humbly with our God and show that by listening for God's voice and listening to God speak through others?

So, here is your first assignment. To whom will you listen tomorrow to show that

you don't know it all? To show that you walk humbly with God, to whom will you listen tomorrow? Only then will you learn to love justice and do mercy.

Laura reminded me that we once heard a guy who is the mayor of Newark, New Jersey. Harvard educated, smart guy, and having a terrible time because all the problems he thought he was going to be able to solve in Newark were proving almost impossible, beating him down. He lived in public housing so that he could identify with the poorest of the poor and see the problems. But, when he went into his apartment at night, he felt like he had lost ground. One night he was going up, and he said to a friend, "I just don't know what to do." And the friend said, "Well, you ought to go talk to Mama." Mama was a woman who was the matriarch of the next building over. So he goes over to Mama and he says, "Mama I don't know what to do. It's just not working right. I'm about ready to quit. What should I do?" And Mama says, "It's because you don't hear it." "What do you mean I don't hear it? I'm listening hard. What do you mean?" "You don't hear it." And Mama takes him down all the flights of stairs, out into the middle of the street in this busy Newark neighborhood and says, "Listen." "What do you . . ." "Shut up. Listen." And so he listens to the traffic and the shots being fired and the yelling going on. And he says, "I don't hear it. What are you saying?" She says, "Listen. Don't you hear it?" "What's it saying, Mama? What's it saying?" And the woman leaned forward and grabbed him by the tie and said, "It's whispering to you, 'Do sumpthin.' Not do everything. Do sumpthin. Don't do everything. Do sumpthin." She let go of his tie and said, "Now, go do sumpthin."

The people of Issachar were only 200 in number. They couldn't stop the war or choose the king. They could only do sumpthin. We've seen just recently how people small in number couldn't hold back the water, but they could do sumpthin. If you and I want to know the difference between a good trend and a bad trend, the key is will we walk humbly before our God and do sumpthin?

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You speak to us. Through trends that are as new as tomorrow and through Scriptures that are as old as the hills. I pray that Your voice will filter to us so that we walk humbly with You, that our humility will show in the way we treat people with mercy, and that our love for justice would be more than a sound bite. That tomorrow at school or the day after that, at our home or at work, we wouldn't try to cure the world, but we would do sumpthin. Show us what it is, and give us the courage to do it. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. 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.*