

## *Life Vest Inside*

**John 15:10-12** If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. <sup>12</sup> This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you.

**Matthew 10:42** I assure you that everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones because they are my disciples will certainly be rewarded."

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I've noticed when you get on a ferry boat that somewhere, in a prominent position, is a huge cabinet with large lettering that says, "Life Vests Inside." If something should happen to the boat, it's reassuring to know that in that cabinet there are life vests inside.

It's interesting how things work out sometimes. There was no advance plan to do a sermon series on reconciliation, but that developed as a recurring issue in the past few months. While we might think that it is up to us to "get right with God," when we search the scriptures, we learn that God reconciles us to himself. God takes the initiative. God does the work. God does the reconciling, not us. So, we might say, metaphorically speaking, when we're drowning in guilt, if we look in scripture there's a life vest inside, a life vest called reconciliation.

There are lots of life vests in scripture. There are life vests of commandments to save us when we're drowning in uncertainty and confusion. There are life vests of hope when we read about the lives of our faithful ancestors. There are life vests of reassurance when we're drowning in doubt. There are life vests of God's steadfast love for when we're drowning in uncertainty and fear.

A few years ago this congregation felt like it was drowning. The community known as first Pres was shrinking as members transferred their membership from here to eternal membership in the church triumphant. The church and its budget were both shrinking. We knew that we needed to grow and that we felt that younger families would increase both our number and our energy. But at that moment it felt like we were slowly drowning and we needed life vests. And we found some life vests. One was inside our heads. We changed our self perception. We made the conscious decision to stop thinking of ourselves as a dying church and to see ourselves as a new church start that was blessed with a paid for facility. And then, as a new church start we took a fresh look at what we did and what we offered.

Our new attitude was a life vest. We threw away our unspoken dress code and we were buoyed up by that life vest. We slipped out of a straight jacket of always worshiping with a rigid liturgy and found a life vest in variety of order, music, and style. Over time, as we experimented with video projection, we realized that being bound to a bulletin was more weight than life vest. These were all small, incremental changes that allowed us to float more freely. These were life vests inside – inside worship, inside the sanctuary – and instead of sinking, we began floating and bobbing along.

But we have to guard against two things. One is stagnation. It's so easy to think, "Okay, things are better now. We can relax, rest from our efforts, and coast along. Unfortunately, if we aren't moving forward, we're slipping backwards, because the rest of the world is moving on. The other thing to guard against is discouragement. Every journey has potholes and speed bumps. We cannot let difficulties stop us in our tracks. Instead we must have a long range view of things and plow ahead despite any obstacles in the pathway.

I'm going on sabbatical. There's a huge difference between a sabbatical and a vacation. We tend to see the purpose of a vacation as fun and entertainment. The word sabbatical comes from the word Sabbath. The focus of Sabbath and of a sabbatical is rejuvenation and renewal through rest and study. My assignment, if you will, is to return to you with restored energy and with some measure of deeper understanding or increased wisdom to share with you. So what is your goal during the time that I'm gone? I've already suggested that you would do well to soak up all that Nathan has to offer. But that's a relatively passive thing. I want to push you to make use of the life jacket inside, inside you already.

The old Jewish rabbis listed 613 commandments in scripture. That's an overwhelming number to remember and try to obey. A Jew confronted his rabbi, saying, "That's too many for me to get my head around. I'm doomed to failure!" The rabbi replied, "Don't try to know and obey all 613 at once. Pick one and practice obeying it before adding another." This summer, I suggest that this congregation pick one thing to add to their practice of faithful living. Jesus said, "Everybody who gives even a cup of cold water to these little ones . . . will certainly be rewarded." Pick one. Pick the practice of offering a glass of cold water, the practice of doing a small kindness for someone you don't know.

A friend of mine in ministry posted a video on his Face Book page. The video was produced by a non-profit named (you guessed it) "Life Vest Inside." Let's watch it.

#### SHOW VIDEO CLIP

Small acts of kindness can roll onward from person to person, sending kindness to places and people you never meet. The point isn't to fix the world, end poverty, abolish hunger, or bring about world peace. Those are long journeys, but as the Chinese saying goes, "The longest journey begins with one step." I urge you to pick one step and take it. Offer a glass of cold water, a bite to eat, a helping hand, a flower to a stranger who looks a bit down, a larger tip to the waitress. Use the life vest inside of you to lift up someone. You needn't say a word. In fact, it's probably better if you don't speak. Simply offer the glass of cold water in whatever form it takes.

Paper clipped to your bulletin is some simple cards that describe a little bit about First Pres. These are an early draft. More talented folks are exploring nicer designs. But this was what I could get printed before I leave. After offering a glass of cold water or whatever thoughtful thing you have done, as you start to walk away hand the person one of the cards. Then just walk away. No sales pitch. No pressure. No pressure on them to listen to you. No pressure on you to evangelize. Let your actions simply show the love of Christ. People will see the life vest inside you!

I promise that an amazing thing will happen. Not only will they be buoyed up, but so will you. The life vest inside you is big enough for two. So, make use of your life vest inside! There's your sabbatical renewal and rejuvenation path. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

The readiness of God to love, to forgive, and to reconcile us to himself

Is beyond belief – but believe it anyway!

Start practicing to sing in the massed choir of heaven,

Remembering that you never know who may be holding the other half of the hymnal!