

“Taking the first step”

August 26, 2007

Text: 2 Kings 5:1-14, Luke 7:1-10

I.

Are there things in your life that you want to do ... things that you know you *should* do, but you keep putting them off?

It may be some major project around the house. It may be with a new diet or exercise program. It may have to do with rebuilding a relationship with a family member/friend. Or, it may be some preparation process we need to go through at work, at school.

Whatever it is, we want to do it; we know we need to do it—we should do it—but we hold back.

Perhaps we're tired and weary ... or maybe we're anxious or lacking confidence on some level.

So often, the KEY is *taking the first step*.

II.

When God called Moses to go down into Egypt to command Pharaoh to *let God's people go* (for centuries the Israelites had been oppressed in Egypt, enslaved by Pharaoh's mighty hand), at first Moses resisted. He didn't want to go ... said he wasn't a good speaker.

Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? he complained. Of course, eventually God wins this *tug of wills*, but the KEY is for Moses to actually *take the first step*. As the NIKE commercial urges us: ***Just do it!*** Go for it! Get beyond the malaise, the laziness, the endless procrastination.

In God's calling of the prophet **Jeremiah**, at first, Jeremiah, too, resisted. He said he was too young. *But I don't know how to speak ...I'm only a boy!*

Again, the KEY for Jeremiah is to *take the first step*.

Our steps, of course, are taken in faith. We step out in trust. In faith and in trust that God's spirit is with us—that it's encouraging us and guiding us.

But the initiative has to begin with us.

III.

1. In our scripture readings this morning, the Syrian General, **Naaman**, wants desperately to be healed of his leprosy.
2. In our story from Luke's gospel, the **centurion** has a slave (a worker of some sort) whom he highly values ... but who has become gravely ill—close to death, Luke tells us. A centurion, by the way, is an officer in the Roman army in charge of a century, a hundred men.

Both of these men have positions of leadership. Both are persons of status. Yet, they *come to faith* differently. But isn't that the way it is? Don't we all *come to faith* in different ways? With both Moses and Jeremiah it took some time. There were things they need to work through.

In *taking the first step* of faith, Naaman is resistant, the centurion is eager. Naaman is a military commander. He's used to giving orders, to being in charge, to controlling the variables of his life.

Friends, any person can be called to faith. With Naaman, it's a slower process.

The centurion, on the other hand—clearly—already believes. He's heard about Jesus ... how God's love has been revealed in and through his life. Perhaps he's known people whom Jesus has healed or helped in some way. In any event, the centurion comes more easily to faith.

Still, in both instances, *taking the first step* is a critical factor; and we take it in faith—in faith and in trust.

The African impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance of greater than 30 feet. Amazing! Yet these magnificent animals can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. Why? Because they won't jump if they can't see where their feet will land.

Faith is the ability to trust what we cannot see. It is the assent—the YES—of the will to things unseen.

IV.

Any time we're trying to make a positive change in our life ... trying to learn something new ... trying to be disciplined in the day-in-day-out realization of our goals, *taking the first step* important.

I know when I work out, sometimes it's the last thing I want to do. But if I am able to muster up the *will* to get started ... to do the first set of whatever the exercise is, then I'm on my way and it's no problem. Again, *taking the first step* is the KEY.

It's the same with our participation in some *self-help* process. Eventually, we have to go to the first meeting. Or if our need is in education; we have to *take the first step* and enroll in the class.

In our church, *the United Church of Christ*, being *called to faith* is not some **cookie cutter** process. There's no *one size fits all* formula for believing.

Everyone needs the space to be drawn to faith in their own time ... in ways that work for them. Our *coming to faith* can be prompted and influenced, but it can't be forced.

Given Naaman's disposition and *status in life*, he's resistant to giving up control. He's the kind of person that needs to work things through his head first. I'm kind of like that; perhaps you are, too! For him, *coming to faith* needs to meet certain criteria of logic and practicality.

Still, *when the rubber hits the road*, faith is a matter of the will more than the head. Nonetheless, sometimes we have to go through the head to get to the will. When the head has had a chance to work things through, eventually the spirit is ready and the will takes over.

Once Naaman gets beyond the resistance of his head and *takes the first step* into the waters of the River Jordan—beyond the logic, beyond the practicality—healing is close at hand.

V.

Friends, are there things in our lives that we've been putting off? Things that we need to act on? Decisions we need to make? Challenges we need to stand up to?

No doubt there are and we simply need to find the courage, find the will, and then *take the first step*. Once the first step is taken, the second step is easier, and on and on.

In the timeless Parable of the Prodigal Son, when the young prodigal at last makes the decision to return home, to go back to his father, who waits for him with open arms, the KEY is that first step back.

He's made a mess of his life. Hey, as we all know, stuff happens. Through a combination, usually, of bad choices, we find ourselves slipping further and further off track. But the KEY is to *come to our senses* and take that first step to get back on track.

At the point when the prodigal son says, *I've had it ... I've hit bottom ... things cannot possibly get any worse. I'm going to go back, throw myself at the mercy of my father and hope for the best.*

That's the critical moment; that's the first step. At that point, he's on his way to getting his life back. But the first step is the KEY.

Sometimes in our lives, we have to suck it up, admit our errors and mistakes, and—moment by moment, day by day—get ourselves back on track. And again, *taking the first step* is the KEY.

VI.

We've all done things that we regret ... things we wish we could take back ... we've all known situations that need to be resolved ... where there's been some level of estrangement or alienation.

And we lay awake at night anxious about the distance between us and whomever, and trying to figure out what we can do. Doing nothing only serves to eat away at our spirit to the point where we're not our best self.

So, what to do? The Spirit invites us to stand up to the challenge.

Again, *take the first step!* Make the initial gesture. Reach out and initiate a healing process. Remember, friends, we NEVER walk alone ... no matter what we're dealing with.

The will of God will never take you ...

- where the grace of God cannot find you ...
- where the spirit of God cannot lead you and guide you ...

It will never take you ...

- where the tender mercies of God cannot sustain you
- where the calming hand of God cannot reassure you ...

It will never take you ...

- where the love of God cannot warm your heart ...
- where the peace of God cannot fill your spirit ...

In so many part of our lives, friends, where we need to stand up to the challenges that are before us ... challenges to reach out and become a bigger and better person ... challenges to in fact realize God's purposes for our lives, so often it's a matter of simply *taking the first step* ...and then turning it over to God.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com