

**“Community Journey”**  
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Today is the first episode in a series of what we’re calling “Community Journeys” – opportunities for you to hear the stories of some of us who are behind what goes on at chapel. Today you’ll hear my story.

Stan Gaede threw me the perfect pass for doing this. He focused us on *the* question: “Why are we here? Here on earth, here at Westmont, here at chapel?” And he supplied an answer that will take us forever to unpack: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever. . . . To love God with all our heart, self, strength.”

After those chapel talks, a question continues to haunt me: “How?” *How* do we glorify and love God this way? Today, I want to use my story as a series of ways, still unfolding, that God has been leading me to answer that question.

One of the many odd stories in the Gospel of Mark concerns a blind man from Bethsaida [Mark 8:22-25].

At first, this seems like a unique story. Nowhere else in the gospels is there a “double-half-healing” like this one. But don’t be deceived. Nearly the opposite is true. Mark is saying that the *disciples*, and we readers, are *like* the blind man. Right after this comes Mark’s turning point: Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter gulps, raises his hand, and answers that he’s the Messiah. And he’s right. But the whole last half of the gospel is proof that Peter is actually *wrong* – not wrong *that* Jesus is Messiah, of course, but wrong about *how* Jesus is Messiah. Peter and the others see – but *what* they see is a walking tree. They *kind of* get it, but not really. It takes a second (and third?) application of grace before they *really* get it.

So this story is a kind of parable for Christian discipleship. Jesus comes along and *huycks* on us, and then sometimes we *begin* to get it. We see – but what we see is still distorted. It’s only after further grace, and a *careful look* at him, that we are truly restored.

Here, in three chapters, is how my life tells this story.

**Chapter 1** begins in college, when I took part in an unforgettable worship service, which was led by one of the world’s extraordinary worship leaders. His name is **Bruce Springsteen**, rock god. He led the Los Angeles Coliseum through an encounter – a worship service – that cleansed, inspired, and joined us in fellowship. This started happening even before he took the stage. Both to release and to intensify our energy while we waited, we did “the wave” – all of us, louder than I’ve ever heard people do the wave

before or since. Then 40,000 people to my left shouted “Less filling!” and 40,000 people to my right shouted “tastes great!” It was like echoing thunderclaps on Mt. Sinai. The performance lasted four hours. That night taught me that idolaters are some of the best worshipers, and idols are some of the best worship leaders.

That night was a healing experience, but a dangerous one. It’s so easy, and so *sensible*, after hearing an E Street Band concert – or a “classic” by Roberta Flack – to get up and follow that walking tree. But wait a minute. Is that tree a Messiah, or a wooden idol? You know, I couldn’t really tell; and to this day I’m still not sure. Bruce gave us all something truly good – a sliver of heaven – but he did it in such a way that made *him* the center of the experience. And that left all of us stranded after the last encore. After those four hours were over and our hearing came back, where could we go but back to our stereos to wait for the next concert?

You know, we live in a world *full of worship*. We routinely bow down before sports teams, and celebrities, and presidential candidates, and the American flag. Many fellow Christians think these forms of idolatry are fundamentally evil. I don’t. I think they are fundamentally good – and horribly distorted. Bruce *really is* a gifted worship leader. The tragedy is that he’s missed his calling.

I figured this out only because God laid his hands on me a second time. This brings me to my current church, and to our worship leader, **Tommy Walker**. You’ll meet him later this semester. I’ve *looked intently* at Tommy – really at everybody at church – and *finally* seen clearly that real worship isn’t powered by personality, but by the Holy Spirit. It’s not ultimately an “experience” – not even an experience of *God*. It’s not even a life-changing “encounter.” It’s a *coming together*, a *communion* – with each other and with God, in Christ alone, arranged by the Spirit.

Now you might think that the only way for me to learn this would be to burn my record albums, forswear celebrities and electric guitars, and immerse myself in “traditional” worship – robes, pulpits, choirs, organs, candles, and so on. That might have worked – those things *are* wonderful for distinguishing true worship from worldly idolatry. But ironically, Tommy *is* something of a celebrity, and he plays a *mean* electric guitar. And our church cheers, sways, laughs, rocks, and dresses down. To casual observers, we probably look a lot like – a concert. But we are *not* a concert. We go out of our way to emphasize that we’re *not* being entertained, and we’re *not* worshiping the worship leaders. In fact, the cultural similarity between Christian Assembly and the Coliseum is culturally subversive. It overturns the world’s idols not by ignoring them, but by taking them on directly. We show enthusiasm for Jesus the way our culture gives it up for favorite sports teams and pop stars; and in doing that, we expose the world’s gods as dumb idols. I mean, after you worship Jesus, who’s going to die for Brittany Spears?

Why am I telling you this? Here's why: "Love the Lord with all your heart." The Coliseum and Christian Assembly are two of the many graces that have gradually taught me how to do this. And my vision for Westmont, and specifically for chapel at Westmont, is that it be a place that trains us in heartfelt love.

**Chapter 2** actually begins before chapter 1. I grew up in a supposedly "churchgoing" family that rarely actually went to church. My family considered itself religious, but never talked about God. We had lots of Bibles, but trotted one out only annually in order to read Luke 2 (the Christmas story from "a Charlie Brown Christmas"), while the kids practically *died* waiting to open our presents. Our Christianity was real. But it was thin.

Then came high school, and healing number one: a friend whose mother was one of those apocalyptic nuts who believed **Hal Lindsey's** claims that the rapture would come in 1982 *at the latest*. (That was before we realized it would happen last January.) Anyway, she fed Dave and me her Hal Lindsey books, and turned *us* into apocalyptic nuts too. It all made sense: Jerusalem was Israel's again, a huge computer in Brussels knew everything about us, Visa cards were being printed with 666's all over them, the ten nations of the European Community were adopting a common currency. And we needed to belong to Jesus if we weren't going to be *left behind*.

I was seeing something, all right. Walking trees. Lindsey taught me something true: Worship is *personal*. I can't take a free ride to heaven on my family's cultural Christianity. *I*, personally, have to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior. But what did Lindsey's Jesus ask of me? Say the Sinner's Prayer, count the earthquakes and wars, and be ready for the Rapture. I did this not for God, but for my own good. I didn't want to be left behind!

Long afterward came a day I read another book by another apocalyptic nut: **St. Luke** the evangelist. I was home for Christmas vacation in college, and I was bored. So before bed I fished around for a book in the new nightstand in my room, which my parents had completely redecorated in the three months since I left home. Anyway, I was fishing around, and what should I find but a New Testament! So I opened it up to Luke's Gospel, for the first time – and spent the next few hours in terror. Luke's Jesus wasn't like my family's Jesus, or Lindsey's. He wanted a lot more than a sinner's prayer. He wanted it *all*. He wanted my parents, and my friendships, and *even* my money. Worst of all, all this wasn't for *my* sake, just to make me "saved." It was for *him*. In a word, he wanted my *worship*.

I *looked and looked* through the Gospel of Luke, and I finally saw Jesus instead of a walking tree. Luke's Jesus has a simple answer to the question of *how* to worship: In every possible way. Worship is not a means of personal fulfillment. It's not about feeling *convicted* or *jubilant* from all that singing and

praying. It's not just having your salvation reassured by someone like me or your pastor up front. It's not about having a dog-eared, underlined, memorized Bible. It's a call in Jesus to *die*.

Luke finally taught me something about Old Testament worship I had never understood: Why is it so *bloody*? It's because the blood of sacrificial worship points to the blood of *Jesus'* sacrificial worship. And this is why New Testament worship turns out to be even bloodier. Luke taught me why the climax of Christian worship isn't fast songs, nor slow songs, nor even the offering or sermon or altar call. It's the body and blood of Christ we share in communion, because to love God with all your self is to suffer with Christ and be raised with him to eternal life.

I long to get that across to students; and as I try, I see in your eyes a longing to hear it. Our worlds, and even many of our churches, keep telling us to hang onto our lives if we want to save them. The tighter we hang on, the sweatier our palms get, and the more we slip. *Let go*. "Love the Lord with all your self." We don't automatically know how to do this. We have to be *trained* away from our survivalism. I want chapel at Westmont, all of Westmont, to guide us in serving God – serving so completely that it's not ultimately to save our own skins, but to glorify the One we love.

**Chapter 3** begins at six in the morning, on a gray fall day in high school. The days have been getting shorter, the nights colder, and this morning there's frost on the field. I'm crouched on a starting block, stalling, until my coach goads me into jumping off, and into the water. His name is **Brian Murphy**, and he's my water polo coach. Murph taught me that worship is a team sport. He – no, the whole team – also taught me that worship is a practice that *takes* practice. It's a tradition that requires *training* – much, much more than it requires enthusiasm.

Water polo also taught me that worship is *character-forming*, which you all know is a code word for saying that it's not always *fun*. In fact, worship can be exhausting, painful, discouraging, and miserable.

Now your pastors may never have admitted this in public, because such confessions have the ring of failure about them, and letting the congregation sense failure is like letting the other team see the fear in your eyes. But *failure* has nothing to do with it. Do you think Jesus was never exhausted, in pain, discouraged, or miserable?

We weren't a failing team. We were league champions every year. There were some moments of great fun. Yet I rarely *wanted* to be on the team. Or, to put it more precisely, I was really on the team because my parents told me I needed it in order to get into a good college. But so what? It didn't matter anyway. My coach never asked us if we *wanted* to swim thousands of meters a day, or if we *felt led* to pass a ball until it was dry, or if we had a *calling* to do fifty pushups for touching the side, or were *gifted*

to tread water for ages with our hands straight up. And he never, ever asked me whether I was being *fed*. My performance was *expected*, simply because I was on the team.

Despite both my lack of enthusiasm and my mediocrity as a player, water polo deeply changed me. It made me a team player. It not only made me strong at the time, but gave my body a *memory* that has lingered long afterwards. That memory helps me get back in shape more easily on the few occasions when I actually try. It also preserves habits, both good and bad, which come back right along with the old strength when I swim again. (For instance, I still don't kick hard enough.) Thus water polo has also taught me that worship needs to be vigilant. Water polo formed me in a way to think and live – as a water polo *player* – that spills over into other areas of my life. It was a real blessing. What a fool I would have been to sleep in instead.

Of course, I didn't see this at the time. I only saw walking trees. I knew I was there to get into “the college of my choice” (even though I didn't know yet what the college of my choice *was*). I knew it was “good for me,” and that “someday I'd be glad I did it.” Little did I know that in our little polo squad, God was showing me an image of the life of the Church.

This I found out only years later, long after becoming a churchgoing Christian, when my wife and I were a part of a struggling **church-plant in Glendale**, California. Our old pastor had left us and split the congregation, and the California recession of the early '90s was hollowing out our already small group of young singles and families. We met at a YMCA, and had to tear down and pack up our “sanctuary” every week. It was months before we even landed an *interim* pastor, who preached for us while pastoring his own church 40 miles away.

We had started out as your typical American evangelical church: A collection of confident, enthusiastic people who depended upon their pastor to organize them, “feed” them, and empower them for ministry. After 17 months we finally brought out a new pastor. By then we were fatigued, burned out, and quite afraid the whole thing would fail. But do you know what? Our months of struggling together without a pastor had really made us a *church*. We had stopped depending on a “professional” to supply the missing ingredient, and started depending on each other. And *that* was the missing ingredient.

This is one reason I'm excited about chapel this semester: Not because it's always going to be fun, but because it's sometimes going to be *hard*. Until January, we're without a chaplain – even an interim chaplain. I'm just an *unchaplain*. But this means that we're learning a new way to be a Christian community. Because worship is work – hard work – for everyone.

I'm beginning to suspect that Jesus ascended into heaven because he knew if he didn't leave, *he* would always be in the way of our true discipleship. Now that doesn't mean we don't want Jesus to come

back – and it doesn't mean that I'm not eager for Ben Patterson to come. My little church plant was incredibly blessed by the pastor who finally arrived after those 17 months. But part of the reason we were so blessed is that the long interval had made us such fertile ground for his leadership. We now had *resources* to offer.

Before this wrenching experience, I already knew that much of life is *work*. I worked hard at school, and I worked hard at my job. But until then, when I went to Church, I was seeing walking trees. I thought that human effort, duty, and obligations were “worldly,” and assumed that the Spirit would provide enthusiasm to fuel my Christian life. The sheer effort of keeping a church afloat without a pastor, simply not to let my team down, was a second laying on of hands. Finally I looked intently at what I was doing, and I was restored. From then on I've understood that worship is labor too.

There's another, sharper word here: Worship is *mandatory*. The Law of Moses does not *suggest* that we worship God. It *commands* us. Here I should bring up something that some of you find irritating and even unspiritual: The fact that *chapel* is mandatory.

Now in a way, chapel is actually *optional*. No one is forcing you to come to Westmont! Just as I signed up for water polo at the beginning of the season, you registered at Westmont this semester. And just as joining the team made every practice and game mandatory, so coming to Westmont has involved you in a whole set of “mandatory” commitments. Chapel attendance is only one of these.

But in another way, this mandate is a symbol of the mandatory nature of *all* worship. I think you should consider this requirement an opportunity to learn lessons and habits that stick around after you leave Westmont, when no one is collecting chapel cards. And if you don't like it, then in a way, *good* – you're on the way to learning what I was learning in the water at six a.m. What kind of team would we have been if we had only come when it “felt right?” Though I care deeply that you want to come, as a coach, I care even more that coming is changing you. To worship is to love God *athletically* – with all our *strength*. Even when it costs. Even when it hurts. Consider your chapel cards and the threats behind them an accountability structure, sort of like the biblical plagues, that will build a discipline in you. Most of your fellow churchgoers are so blinded by self-interest and consumerism that they'll never understand it, and that's a shame. When we gather under the banner of God's *Law* of love, God is delighted, and we are built up – no, *buffed* up – for even greater service.

I'm finished. What I've been telling you is that God has *already* been teaching me, and teaching you all, *how* to worship in spirit in truth, *how* to love God entirely. Look back, look intently, and see how God has done this in uncountable ways. Jesus had only one question for the blind man: “Do you see something?” Well, what *do* you see? Focus; look carefully; concentrate. *Now* what do you see?