

Sunday Column 1

– THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JOINING AND FOLLOWING

There is a difference between joining an organization and following a person.

I have been a member of many organizations. I have signed forms, paid dues, attended meetings, and let memberships lapse when I stopped showing up. Membership is transactional. The organization exists to provide something; I decide whether the exchange is worth my investment. When it is no longer worth it, I leave.

Following is different. When you follow someone, you are not primarily exchanging value—you are entering into relationship. You watch how they move. You try to understand why they make the choices they do. You go to places you would not have gone on your own. And over time, something of who they are begins to show up in who you are.

When Jesus walks along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and says 'Follow me,' Jesus is not enrolling people in a program. Jesus is not offering a doctrinal statement to agree with or a cause to support. Jesus is making a personal invitation into accompaniment. Come and walk with me. Watch how I do this. See who I go to, who I eat with, what I consider important.

I sometimes think that much of what has gone wrong in the church's history comes from confusing these two things. When Christianity became an institution rather than a following, it naturally began to focus on joining: right beliefs to assent to, right rites to participate in, right membership classes to complete. None of those things are bad in themselves. But when they become primary, the living person of Jesus tends to recede behind the institution that bears his name.

The disciples were not asked to affirm a creed before they were invited. The disciples were asked to come. The credal affirmations came later, slowly, painfully, as following revealed who it was they were following. Peter's confession 'You are the Christ' did not come in an enrollment meeting. It came after months of watching Jesus, being confused by Jesus, being challenged by Jesus, failing Jesus.

I think there is something freeing about this for people in a community like ours. Many people in Girdwood have complicated relationships with institutional religion. Some have been burned by it. Some have simply drifted away without quite knowing why. Some have never had a relationship with it at all.

'Come and see' is not an institutional enrollment. It is a personal invitation to come near to someone worth knowing. And the remarkable thing about Jesus—the thing that strikes me freshest every time I re-read the Gospels—is that when people came near to Jesus, their lives changed. Not because they were coerced or manipulated. But because something about who Jesus was and how Jesus moved in the world was genuinely compelling.

That is what I am hoping for this summer in our message series. Not that we will recruit members or expand programs or demonstrate institutional health. But that we will come near enough to Jesus to be changed by what we see. And that some of that change will be visible to the people in our community who are watching.

What would it mean for you, this week, to follow rather than join? To practice attention rather than performance? I find that question surprisingly difficult. But I also find it unusually alive.

Sunday Column 2 – THE GOSPEL WE REPLACED

I want to say something honest: I think we have, in large part, replaced the gospel Jesus preached with a different gospel. Not a bad gospel, necessarily. But a different one. And I think the difference matters.

The gospel Jesus preached was the kingdom of God. He announced it in city after city, town after town: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news.' That was his message. Not a formula for individual salvation, not a spiritual technique, not a path to personal flourishing. A reign. A new order breaking into the existing order. An announcement that everything is changing.

The gospel we have often preached in its place is what scholars sometimes call 'the plan of salvation': a set of propositions about sin, atonement, belief, and heaven, which, when assented to, result in the individual's eternal security. This is not entirely wrong. But it is radically different from what Jesus preached. It is smaller. More manageable. More private. And it tends to produce a different kind of person.

When the kingdom of God is the gospel, conversion means turning toward a new order—a new way of relating to God, neighbor, and creation. Zacchaeus doesn't just have a private spiritual experience; he restructures his economic life. The community Jesus gathers is not a collection of privately saved individuals; it is a visible, public, boundary-crossing community that itself demonstrates what the kingdom looks like.

When the plan of salvation is the gospel, conversion tends to mean assenting to certain beliefs and being assured of a post-death destination. The visible transformation of relationships, communities, and social structures can easily become optional. After all, those things are not the point. The point is getting people across a theological threshold.

I do not want to be dismissive of the tradition that formed many of us. There is real wisdom in attending to the individual soul. There is real grace in the assurance of forgiveness. But I think we are capable of holding those goods while also recovering the larger, more demanding, more beautiful gospel that Jesus himself announced.

One small test: Does your understanding of salvation have anything to say about the way you treat your neighbor? The way you use money? The way you relate to the created world around you? Does it have anything to say about what Girdwood looks like, in practice, when people who follow Jesus live here?

If it does—if the gospel you carry is that large—then the reign of God is near. Right here in the mountains.

Sunday Column 3

– THE PROBLEM WITH THE WORD ‘SPIRITUAL’

I have developed a small problem with the word 'spiritual.' Not with the reality it points to—I believe deeply in the life of the spirit and its cultivation. My problem is with what the word has come to mean in practice: an interior, private, essentially individual experience that is separate from and elevated above the material, embodied, social dimensions of life.

When we say things like 'church is a spiritual community' or 'faith is a spiritual matter,' we often mean: this is an interior matter, not a public one. It has to do with the soul, not the body. With the eternal, not the temporal. With personal experience, not social arrangement.

Jesus did not seem to understand things this way. When John the Baptist sent to ask whether Jesus was 'the one who is to come,' Jesus answered by pointing not to spiritual experiences but to material events: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the poor have good news preached to them. The evidence of the kingdom was visible, bodily, and socially concrete.

I think about this often in relation to Girdwood. We live in a place where people regularly describe their outdoor experiences as 'spiritual.' The mountain, they say, is their church. The wilderness is where they find God. I do not want to dismiss this—I think they are often right that something real is happening there. But I also notice that a spirituality that stays entirely on the mountain can become a spirituality that asks nothing of us in relation to our neighbor, our community, our common life.

The gospel Jesus preached was not primarily about private spiritual experience. It was about the in-breaking of a new order—one that had specific implications for how the poor were treated, how strangers were welcomed, how enemies were

regarded, how money was used. Those implications were not secondary applications of the real gospel. They were the gospel, made concrete in human community.

I have come to think that one of the church's gifts to a community like ours is precisely this integration: taking what people rightly experience as 'spiritual' on the mountain and connecting it to what that experience demands of them in the valley. The encounter with beauty and transcendence on a ski run or a trail is real. But a faith that stays on the mountain and never shows up in the way we treat our neighbors is, by Jesus' own measure, incomplete.

Whole-life faith is harder than spiritual experience. It asks more. It exposes more. But it also offers more: the possibility that every dimension of your life—work, money, relationships, creativity, physical presence—becomes a site of participation in the kingdom.

That is a larger life than the one 'spiritual' usually points to. And I think it is the one Jesus had in mind.

Sunday Column 4

– WHY THE GOOD NEWS HAS TO BE STRANGE

I want to say something that might sound counterintuitive: the gospel should be a little strange. Not off-putting, not hostile, not alienating. But genuinely strange. If the good news we offer sounds exactly like what the surrounding culture already affirms, something has probably gone wrong.

Here is why. The world we live in operates on certain assumptions: that competition is natural, that scarcity is the fundamental condition, that power protects what it has, that forgiveness is weakness, that the vulnerable should manage their own vulnerability. These are not usually stated as beliefs; they are simply the air we breathe.

The kingdom of God announces a different world: that abundance is possible, that the vulnerable are the particular concern of God, that forgiveness is strength, that the last shall be first, that enemies are to be loved. This is not a list of nice ideas. It is a description of a different social order — one that has been inaugurated in Jesus and that Jesus' followers are called to embody.

When the church loses this strangeness — when the gospel sounds like a motivational framework for personal success, or a blessing on the existing social arrangements, or a technique for inner peace that asks nothing in particular of the outer life — it has ceased to be the gospel Jesus preached. It has become something domesticated. Safe. Comfortable. Ineffective.

But there is also a danger in the other direction: becoming strange in a way that is merely sectarian, eccentric, or judgmental. The strangeness of the gospel is not the strangeness of refusal and withdrawal. It is the strangeness of radical welcome — of including

people who are normally excluded, of forgiving when forgiveness seems absurd, of sharing when holding seems rational.

Jesus was not strange in the way that cults are strange. Jesus was strange in the way that genuine love is strange in a world organized around self-protection. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners — not because he had low standards, but because he had different ones. Jesus welcomed children and women into his company in a world that systematically excluded them. Jesus died forgiving his executioners.

I think there is an opportunity here for a congregation like ours. People in Girdwood have, in many cases, walked away from institutional religion. They might have low tolerance for performance and high tolerance for honest imperfection. If the gospel we practice is genuinely strange in the right way — if it looks like radical welcome, unexpected generosity, forgiveness that does not calculate, care for the vulnerable that does not ask what is in it for us — people will notice. And some of them will want to come closer.

That kind of strangeness does not require us to have everything figured out. It requires us to take Jesus seriously. Which is, of course, its own kind of strange.

The good news is not less than what the world offers. It is more. And the 'more' is what makes it strange.

Sunday Column 5

– FAITHFULNESS HAS AN ADDRESS

I want to say something on behalf of small congregations. Not as a consolation prize for what we have failed to become. As a genuine argument for what we actually are.

The dominant narrative in American Christianity for the past several decades has assumed that bigger is better: larger congregations are more vital, more effective, more pleasing to God. Church health is measured in growth metrics. The assumption is so pervasive that pastors of small churches often feel they are failing, even when their congregations are healthy, loving, and genuinely engaged in their communities.

I do not think that narrative is correct. And I do not think it is particularly Christian.

Jesus did not operate on scale. He chose twelve people — not twelve thousand — as the inner circle of his movement. He spent most of his ministry in Galilee, a backwater region of a colonized country, not in Jerusalem, the center of power. The early church, for its first three centuries, had no major buildings, no cultural prestige, and no numerical dominance. It changed the world anyway.

What small congregations can do that large ones often cannot: they can know each other by name. They can notice when someone is missing. They can make decisions together rather than delegating them to professionals. They can be genuinely porous to their surrounding community, rather than requiring that community to navigate institutional complexity in order to be welcomed.

When one theologian describes the church as ‘sign, instrument, and foretaste’ of the kingdom, I think of small communities most naturally. A sign is visible, legible, particular. A community of

twenty to thirty people who actually know each other, who share meals, who notice each other’s grief and celebrate each other’s joy — that is a visible sign of something the world rarely offers. A foretaste is a sample, a preview. Girdwood Chapel at its best gives people a taste of what genuine community might feel like.

None of this means size is irrelevant or that we should never invite people to join us. But it does mean that the measure of faithfulness is not headcount. It is quality of love, depth of formation, and authenticity of engagement with the community we are already in. And faithfulness, it turns out, always has a specific address.

Every congregation occupies a specific place. Not a generic ‘church’ somewhere in the abstract, but this congregation, in this community, with these people. That specificity is not a limitation. It is the form the calling takes. A church that knows its particular place and has named its particular purpose within that place has something irreplaceable to offer — not because it is unique in its theology, but because it is rooted in a way that is genuinely local and genuinely its own.

When our congregation went through visioning conversations over the past year, something came out of that process that I believe is true and worth holding carefully:

“Our vision is to be a heartbeat of Girdwood — connected in love and committed to Christ, with faith that makes room for grace and honors differences.”

I want to notice what this vision does and does not claim.

It does not claim to be the only church, the best church, or the most theologically correct church. It claims to be a heartbeat — something small and regular and necessary, something whose absence would be felt. Not a landmark. Not a monument. A heartbeat.

There is something I want you to sit with for a moment. Girdwood Chapel's building sits at the physical center of this town. Not near the center. Not close to it. At it. When you drive into Girdwood, when you walk its roads, when you orient yourself in this community — this building is at the heart of the place. That is simply true, geographically. And I do not think it is an accident. I think it is a calling written into the ground beneath us. We do not have to become a heartbeat of Girdwood. We are already positioned as one. The question — the only question — is whether we will be alive there.

A heartbeat works in two directions at once. Physically, it is muscle and movement — the body actually sustained, blood actually circulating. A congregation that is a heartbeat is physically present in the life of its community: showing up, sharing meals, knowing names, noticing who is missing, caring for people in their actual circumstances. That is the body of the church doing what bodies do — being present, being local, being here.

But a heartbeat is also the animating center — the vital rhythm that keeps everything else alive. In the biblical tradition, the heart is not only a pump; it is the seat of devotion, desire, and will. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart.' A congregation that is a spiritual heartbeat is the place from which worship rises, where prayer is practiced, where people are formed in the way of Jesus and sent back into the world shaped by something deeper than what they came in with.

Neither without the other. Physical presence without spiritual formation becomes community service without a center. Spiritual formation without physical presence becomes private religion without a body. The heartbeat holds both: we are here, in Girdwood, in the actual life of this community — and we are alive in Christ, in worship, in the practices that shape us toward love. That integration is what the vision is pointing toward.

Notice how the vision holds its three claims together without letting any of them stand alone. Connected in love: genuinely relational, genuinely present, genuinely caring about the specific people in this specific place. Committed to Christ: not simply to community in the abstract, not to a vague spirituality, but to the particular story of Jesus and the kingdom he announced — which is what gives the love its direction and keeps it from collapsing into sentiment. And faith that makes room — which is the hardest of the three, because making room for grace and honoring differences while holding real convictions is genuinely demanding. It does not mean having no center. It means having a center secure enough that you do not need everyone in the room to occupy it with you before you welcome them in.

These three things are not a list. They are a single posture: rooted deeply enough to offer something real, and open widely enough to offer it to everyone.

This vision belongs to Girdwood Chapel specifically. No other congregation has this exact calling in this exact place. And that particularity is the point. The kingdom of God does not arrive in general. It arrives at specific addresses, through specific communities, in specific seasons. When a congregation knows its address — when it can say clearly who it is trying to be and why, in this community, with these neighbors — it is already doing something that is both theologically significant and practically rare.

I think Girdwood Chapel is worth being. Not because of what we might become. Because of what we already are: a small community of people genuinely trying to be a heartbeat — physically present, spiritually alive, rooted and open — at the literal and living center of this place.

That is not nothing. That is actually quite a lot.

Sunday Column 6

– MAYBE WE’RE ALREADY DOING THIS

This happens, or so we like to say, all the time in Girdwood. Someone runs into a neighbor on the trail — not planned, not a scheduled coffee, just two people who happened to be walking the same direction at the same hour — and the conversation goes somewhere real. Not weather, not small talk. Something true about how the year has actually been going. They walk on together for a while, and then they go their separate ways, and that is it. No follow-up meeting. No agenda. Just two people, momentarily, actually known to each other.

And we tell ourselves other versions of this story too. The neighbor who shows up with a chainsaw, or a truck, or a dish of food or homemade dessert, before anyone has had to ask. The work crew that gets each other through a hard winter. I want to be honest: this is a little bit of a flattering story we tell about ourselves, and it is not true of every neighbor or every week. There are plenty of ordinary Tuesdays in Girdwood, same as anywhere, when nobody notices and nobody shows up. But the story persists because it is true often enough to feel like it describes something real about how this town tries to take care of itself — even if we tell it a little larger than life.

I have been wondering about that story lately. Not because I think it is simply accurate, but because I think the version of it that is true might be closer to what John Wesley meant by holiness than anything we might try to build on purpose.

Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, is often quoted as having said ‘there is no holiness but social holiness.’ People sometimes hear that as a call to social justice activism. That is not quite what he meant. He meant something more basic: you cannot become holy by yourself. Not through private discipline, not through solitary prayer, not through personal effort alone.

Holiness, for Wesley, required other people — the friction and grace of being actually known, actually challenged, actually accountable to someone else.

The early Methodists built their whole movement around this conviction. The class meeting — about twelve people gathering weekly, asking each other one honest question, how is it with your soul — was not a program alongside the real spiritual work. It was the spiritual work. And Wesley believed something followed naturally from it: holiness formed in community does not stay inside the community. It reaches outward, toward the neighbor, the stranger, even the person you would rather avoid. That is why the Methodists built schools and clinics alongside their class meetings — not as an extra credit assignment, but as what love of God actually looks like once it is real.

So I keep returning to the trail conversations, the work crews, the chainsaw and the truck and the dish of food — the true parts of the story, when they are actually true. None of that looks like a class meeting. There is no room, no set hour, no list of twelve names, no explicit question about the soul. And yet I wonder whether something like Wesley’s holiness is already present in Girdwood, on the weeks when the story is true, in a form suited to how this town actually lives, outdoors and informally, at the pace of trails and seasons rather than the pace of scheduled meetings.

I want to be careful here, though, in more ways than one. I do not want to answer this too quickly by simply renaming what is comfortable, or what we merely wish were true of us, and calling it formation. Wesley’s class meetings had real friction in them — real accountability, real confession, real challenge.

Neighborliness, even the real kind, is not automatically the same thing as that. A good trail conversation might be the beginning of something like holiness, or it might just be a good conversation. I genuinely do not know yet which one it is, or whether it needs something more from us — more honesty, more regularity, more

willingness to ask the harder question — to become the deeper thing Wesley was pointing toward.

But I find myself hoping our task this season is not to import a room and twelve chairs from eighteenth-century England. I think our task might be to notice what is already real and true in the story we tell about ourselves, and what is only wishful — and then to ask, honestly, whether we are willing to grow the true parts a little deeper. Small, honest, accountable, committed. Leaning inward, into real formation. And leaning outward, into the actual community around us, at the same time.

That might be the most evangelistic thing we could do this year. And it might already be closer to us, on our better days, than we think — not something to build from scratch, but something to tell the truth about, and then, carefully, to deepen.

Sunday Column 7 – THE GOD WHO GOES AHEAD

One of the most disorienting and liberating convictions in the Christian tradition is this: the Spirit of God is not waiting for the church to show up. The Spirit is already there, already working, already preparing the ground. Our job is to pay attention and follow.

I find this genuinely surprising every time I sit with it. Most of the mental models for mission that I grew up with imagined the church as the carrier of something the world lacks. We have the gospel; they do not. We bring God to places where God is absent. The movement is from us to them, from inside to outside, from the church to the unchurched.

But the New Testament tells a different story. Peter goes to Cornelius not because the church had strategically identified Caesarea as a mission target. He goes because God sends him there—to a man who is already praying, already attentive, already

being prepared by the Spirit for what is about to happen. Peter walks into a scene the Spirit has been staging for some time.

This is not an isolated incident. Philip is sent by the Spirit to a specific road where a specific person is sitting in a chariot reading Isaiah and wondering what it means. The Spirit is doing something in that chariot. Philip's job is to join it.

What this means practically is that when we go into Girdwood as a community of faith, we are not entering territory where God is absent. We are entering territory where God is already working—in the longing people feel but cannot name, in the beauty that breaks through the mountains and moves people without their knowing why, in the care people already show each other in hard seasons, in the questions people ask late at night that they would not ask in a church building.

The posture this calls for is not proclamation first. It is attentiveness first. What is the Spirit already doing in this person, this community, this situation? How can I join that rather than replace it with my own agenda?

This is also, I think, one of the things that makes genuinely good mission different from mere church recruitment. Good mission pays attention to the person in front of it. It asks about their life, their longings, their questions. It is curious about what God has been doing in them before the church arrived. And then it offers what it has to offer—the specific good news of the kingdom, the community of those who are trying to follow Jesus—not as the first word, but as a word that belongs in the conversation that the Spirit has already begun.

Where is the Spirit already at work in Girdwood? I would love to sit down with you and wonder about that together.

Sunday Column 8

– HOW DO YOU LEARN TO BELIEVE?

Let me ask you something before I tell you about last Sunday. How do you learn? Not what you have learned — how. When someone hands you something true, an idea, a passage of scripture, a story about another person's life, what actually has to happen before it becomes something you know, rather than something you were merely told?

For some of us, understanding arrives through the written word. We need to hold it, read it slowly, sit with it in silence, let it settle before we know what we think. Give us a printed page and a quiet half hour, and something in us opens. For others of us, understanding works the opposite way. We need to talk before we know what we believe. We need a question asked out loud, a chance to push back, a real conversation moving in real time, before anything like understanding arrives at all. There are surely other patterns besides these two — I do not think this is a complete map of how human beings come to know something — but these two show up often enough in this congregation that I think they are worth naming plainly.

I ask because last Sunday gave me an unexpected, very concrete answer to this question, in the form of two quite different reactions to the same room.

Last Sunday we gathered for Brunch Church, which we hold quarterly, to explore hospitality through the actual, sometimes uneven experience of being hosted and being a host. We opened with communion at an open table, all are welcome, and before we passed the bread I said something I want to sit with a little longer here in writing: that we are guests before we are hosts.

I did not mean that only about Brunch Church. I meant it about everything. Before any of us ever set a table for someone else —

before we ever welcomed a stranger, fed a neighbor, or opened our doors to someone who needed them opened — we were first welcomed ourselves, at a table we did not build, by a host who did not wait for us to earn a seat. Whatever hospitality we practice, we practice second. We are guests before we are hosts. I think that order matters more than we usually notice.

Here is where the morning actually answered the question I opened with. For some of you, Brunch Church is exactly what you have been hoping for — real conversation, real connection, the chance to actually hear how someone's week has gone rather than trading pleasantries on the way out the door. You are the ones who learn by talking. For others of you, I know it was, frankly, too much. The format itself can feel like pressure — the sense that you might be expected to say something, out loud, in front of people, whether or not you have anything you want to say yet. You are the ones who need the page, the quiet, the chance to arrive at understanding on your own terms before anyone asks you to speak it aloud.

I do not think either reaction is the wrong one. I think they are both telling us something true about how differently God has made us, and how differently each of us actually comes to believe anything at all.

Here is why that matters for us specifically. A traditional worship service, especially on one of these long, bright Girdwood summer mornings when half the congregation would rather be on the water or the trail by ten o'clock, does not always give every one of you much to hold on to. For some of you, sitting in a pew in late-August daylight, half your mind already outside, worship can feel thin — present, but not quite reaching you.

And then you leave, and you go have lunch. Maybe with your family. Maybe with friends you have not properly caught up with in weeks. Maybe with someone you ran into by accident at a

restaurant or a brewery, and ended up talking with for an hour longer than either of you planned. And somewhere in that ordinary, unplanned meal — nothing about it organized by the church, nothing about it labeled worship — something opens that the pew did not open. Talking. Listening. Laughing longer than you meant to. Some of you are genuinely surprised, afterward, to realize you just encountered God there — not because the setting was more spiritual, but because it happened to be, for you, the door that was unlocked that particular afternoon.

This is why I am glad — genuinely, not just diplomatically — that Girdwood Chapel does not offer only one door. We have Brunch Church, which we hold quarterly. We have our traditional worship service, week after week, with its own real gifts: the language many of us grew up on, the hymns that carry decades of memory in them, a shape that does not ask you to perform anything at all. We have a Women's Bible study and a Men's group, each with their own rhythm of trust built slowly over time. We have this Sunday column, for those of you who, like me, sometimes need the written page to actually think something through. We have the weekly message and weekly communion, offered every single Sunday whether the room is full or not. None of these is the real church with the others as supplements. They are simply different doors into the same house.

There is another kind of door we sometimes forget to name, because it does not look like a program at all. Our building, and even something as ordinary as our parking lot, has slowly become something the wider community actually uses — not only our own members, but neighbors who need a place to leave a car for a hike or a shuttle into town, visitors coming into Girdwood from outside who need somewhere to park for an afternoon, groups who need a room for a gathering that has nothing to do with worship at all. None of that requires anyone to believe anything, or even to know who we are. It is simply space, offered plainly,

because we happen to have some, and Girdwood, especially in the summer, often does not. I think that quiet, mostly invisible kind of hospitality matters as much as anything we do on a Sunday morning.

A few days ago, someone in our own Girdwood community posted online, looking to start a new kind of group. Alcohol-free activities — movie nights, dinners, kickball, hikes, ceramics, game nights, whatever sounded fun. Not a recovery program, the post was careful to say. You do not need to be sober yourself to join. Just people looking for ordinary ways to connect, make friends, and have a good time together without alcohol being part of the equation.

Within just a couple of days, the post had drawn well over a hundred likes and dozens of comments — a striking response for a town our size.

I want to be honest about what I felt reading it, because I think the honesty matters more than a tidy conclusion would. Mostly what I felt was admiration. Whoever wrote that post noticed a real need in this town and simply moved to meet it. That kind of attentiveness — really seeing what is missing, and responding to it simply and directly — is something I hope keeps growing in all of us, myself included. I do not think it is a coincidence that this showed up in Girdwood specifically. I would like to think the Spirit had something to do with it.

It also named something true and worth saying plainly. Not so long ago, most people in most American towns could reasonably assume that the people around them were Christian, or at least loosely connected to a church, even if only a few times a year. We do not live inside that assumption anymore — not here, and not in most places. Scholars have a name for the shift: we have moved from an era called Christendom, when the church could count on

that shared assumption, into what is often called post-Christendom, when it no longer can.

I do not say that with any sadness. If anything, it leaves me hopeful. That post is proof that the hunger for real connection, for belonging, for a place where you do not have to perform anything to have a seat, is alive and well in Girdwood. It just no longer points toward us automatically. Our task is not to mourn the old assumption. It is to keep building doors real enough that people might actually want to walk through one — the way, it turns out, well over a hundred of our neighbors were already hoping someone would build.

Which is exactly why I think Brunch Church, our parking lot, our building use, and the whole range of doors we are trying to keep open, matter as much as they do. Nobody in Girdwood has to walk through any door we offer. If we only build one kind of door — and if that door only ever looks like Sunday morning worship — we are not simplifying anything. We are simply deciding, without quite meaning to, who never even considers trying us at all.

I want to introduce a book here: Jeffrey Conklin-Miller's *Leaning Both Ways at Once*. Faithful churches, it argues, have to lean two directions at once — rooted deeply in the practices that form us, and genuinely open to the people and forms that do not yet fit our habits. Lean only toward formation, and you get a congregation that is deep but closed, fluent in its own language and increasingly unintelligible to anyone outside it. Lean only toward openness, and you get a congregation with real energy but no floor underneath it — nothing sturdy enough to actually hold anyone through a hard season.

Our traditional worship, our weekly communion, our Bible studies — these are the rooted side. They ask something of us. They form us slowly, the way roots form slowly, mostly out of sight. Brunch Church, our open parking lot, our building shared freely with the

wider community — these are the other lean, open and low-barrier, built for people who need to talk their way into belief rather than read their way into it, or who may never join us for worship at all and simply need somewhere to park for a hike. We need both leans at once, in the same congregation, sometimes in the same person on different weeks of their life.

A good host, I am starting to think, does not serve only the dish they themselves love best. A good host offers a real range of dishes, trusting that different guests will reach for different things, and that this is not confusion — it is actually what hospitality looks like once you take your guests seriously as different people. We are guests before we are hosts. Maybe that is exactly why we are learning, slowly, to set more than one kind of table.

There is more to say before this series closes, and I want to save the harder question — how we might actually know whether any of this took root — for when we get there. For now, this is enough: notice how you, specifically, learn to believe something. And then notice which door here actually opens that kind of understanding for you.

A NOTE ON CHRISTENDOM AND POST-CHRISTENDOM

Christendom refers to the long period in Western history (4c~20c) during which Christianity occupied the cultural center of European and North American public life. In this era, church membership was socially expected, Christian assumptions shaped public institutions and laws, and the church held significant cultural authority. Post-Christendom describes the current situation in much of North America and Western Europe, where those assumptions no longer hold. Church attendance is no longer expected. Christian language is no longer the assumed background of public life. The church now operates from the margins rather than the center — a position that is, historically, closer to that of the early church and arguably better suited to authentic witness. These terms are widely used in contemporary missiology (the theological study of the church's mission) and are developed at length in scholars such as Stuart Murray, Brian McLaren, and Jeffrey A. Conklin-Miller.

Sunday Column 9 – SMALL, SPECIFIC, YOURS

There is a particular kind of tiredness that settles over Girdwood at the end of August — not exhaustion exactly, more like a held breath finally letting go. The daylight is shrinking by minutes now, not seconds. The boats are still going out, but you can feel people doing the math on how many good days are left. Something in the valley is turning toward fall, even while the trail is still green and the tram is still full.

I have been thinking this week about how much of church life runs on the same quiet arithmetic. How many good years are left in this building. How many hands are left to do the work. It is an honest question, and I do not think it is wrong to ask it. But I want to offer a different kind of math today, because I think it is the truer one.

You already have what this church needs. Not someday, after training, after certainty, after the trail crowds thin out and you finally have a free evening. Now. Whatever it is you already do without thinking — the way you notice when someone is missing, the meal you know how to make for a family that just lost someone, the quiet way you listen without trying to fix anything, the specific stubbornness that gets you out to clear someone's steps before they even ask — that is not preparation for ministry. That already is ministry. It was given to you before you ever thought to offer it back.

I keep returning to one small detail in scripture this month: a list of ordinary gifts — teaching, giving, leading, showing mercy —

each one followed by a single word about how it is meant to be carried. Not whether you are good enough at it. Just: give without keeping score. Lead in earnest. Show mercy with something like gladness in it. As if the gift itself was never really the question. Only the manner.

I do not think God is waiting for this congregation to become more impressive before the Spirit shows up here. I think the Spirit already moved in a long time ago, and has been quietly living in whatever you already carry — your hands, your kitchen table, your particular patience with the people other folks have given up on.

So here is my small ask this week, before the light goes any shorter. Notice the thing you already do without being asked. The specific, unglamorous, entirely-yours thing. And do it once more, on purpose, as an offering rather than a habit.

That is not a lesser kind of faith than the dramatic kind. In a town like this one, it might be the only kind that actually reaches anyone.

A Note from Pastor Hyunghee

These Sunday columns from Summer 2026 were written by Pastor Hyunghee. They reflect his thoughts and experiences as he navigated ministry during the spring and summer of 2026.

Some of these reflections may have developed further through ongoing conversations and relationships within our congregation and community.

If you have questions or would like to share your own reflections, please feel free to email Pastor Hyunghee at pastorhyungheekim@gmail.com.