

## **“FAMILY CIRCUS FAITH WALK”**

Jeremiah 29:11 & Proverbs 3:5-6

Chris Cimitile, Father’s Day 2016

The Woodside Church

June 19, 2016

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Good morning Woodside Church. I’m Chris Cimitile coming to you this Father’s Day as a father, a husband, a son, a brother . . . and a believer.

When I was writing this, I thought about adding a catchy subtitle: “Family Circus Faith Walk (A Sinner’s Guide to Salvation).” Snappy, sexy, must see redemption TV. But the more I wrote and reflected, the more I realized, my story is much closer to “Deliverance for Dummies.”

Like a number of folks I’ve met here, I was born into a Catholic family – with all the rights, privileges and required passages: Baptism, Sunday School, First Communion, CCD Classes, Lenten “Sacrifices,” Confirmation, Meatless Fridays and Midnight Mass. And if all that wasn’t enough, I also served as an altar boy and lay communicator.

A dutiful, deliberate, disciple . . . right up until I graduated high school and left for college – and freedom. More precisely, freedom from religion. Sure, I went to Mass on Christmas and Easter, if I was back home. Other than that, I pretty much roamed aimlessly through the Desert of Lapsed Catholics for the better part of thirty years.

With sincere apologies to Bil Keane, creator of The Family Circus classic cartoon strip, my travels looked a little something like this . . .

And during those three decades spent wandering, I visited and revisited all Seven of the Deadly Sins – never meeting one I didn’t like – went heavy on the Gluttony, Lust and Wrath, with an extra side of Pride. And don’t get me started on the Ten Commandments! Sorry, Mom.

When it came to true Christianity, I didn’t care, didn’t know, and didn’t care to know. I was doing just fine, thank you. Instead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, it was Me, Myself and I – a self-sufficient, self-righteous, self-serving sinner. Is there really any other kind?

We had a recent sermon series here entitled: “*Finding Your Way Back to God.*” That started me thinking, how did I find my way back? One of the initial steps was knowing my wife and I wanted to raise our young son with some sort of religious surrounding. He had attended pre-school here, so we thought we’d try Woodside. Came to a Celebration Service. The greeters and everyone else we encountered seemed genuinely friendly and happy to see us.

Unexpectedly so, given my Catholic upbringing. But we sat down anyway and settled in.

All seemed to be going reasonably well until folks started the “lift ‘em ups” – you know, the “joys and concerns” portion of the program. Why were people talking during the service, out loud so everyone else could hear them?!?

When we came back the following week, straight to the Classic Service. Seemed more like church to us, although they do those “lift ‘em up” things in the Sanctuary as well.

The other thing that occurred, even before we came back to Woodside, was the passing of my father. This is me, my son Alex, and my dad, Joe Cimitile, on his 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, about a month before he died back in the fall of 2009.

Those of you who have lost a parent know the hole it creates in your life. It's looking now like that void was destined to become an open door to my heart. More on this later.

Now I've heard that some people get to know God through the proverbial lightning strike. An epiphany of insight! Scales falling from their eyes! Were blind, but now they see! But that's not how it has been for me. No thunderclap, no trumpet blare, no Heavenly Host hallelujahs, but I have changed. Or more to the point, He has changed me.

I came to know God and embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior through nudges, nuances and the occasional knock on the noggin. And what has Godly nudging looked like over the past five or so years?

Joining the Classic Service Choir, Putting Down Roots as a Member of Woodside, gravitating into a Growth Group, volunteering for Code Blue, helping lead the ARISE Worship Service, adding K-LOVE as a preset on my car's radio, becoming an Adventure Club Parent and Kitchen Helper, offering a Career Workshop, participating in The Church Has Left the Building Service Projects, finishing the Run for God 5K (didn't see that coming, did you?), and most recently (and definitive PROOF that the Lord really does work in mysterious ways), my volunteering to give this Father's Day Testimony.

As these nudges and knowing God continued, I began noticing things – about myself, about the world around me, about the less fortunate, and about how fortunate I am. I became much more aware of others' misfortunes and struggles, and I learned to count my abundant blessings instead of my meager burdens. I also started becoming what I'll call a "*Looking Back Believer*." As in looking back, I could see God's hand, God's plan – and God's timing – at work in my life. I give you Exhibit A, as in Arkema . . .

A few years ago, it was announced that the company for which I was working would be acquired by AT&T. Given that AT&T is headquartered in Dallas and the type of work I do is headquarters-centric in nature and that we did not want to move deep in the heart of Texas, I knew my job would eventually be going away. So, I began looking for a new one, before the old one became the lost one.

Dateline King of Prussia, late January 2014. I apply for what seems to be a pretty good opportunity with a specialty chemical company called Arkema – no, I had never heard of them either, but the job looked great. Within a week, the recruiter calls me for a phone screening. He likes what he hears and arranges a February phone interview with the hiring manager. She is intrigued enough to have me come in for a day's worth of interviews in March. I think it goes really well, but then there's radio silence. They don't say no, they don't say yes, they really don't say anything at all.

In June (for those of you counting, that's more than two full months later), a headhunter contacts me for a great opportunity that really fits my background. Hurray! She then describes an eerily familiar role; it's the Arkema job. Rats. Guess they're saying something now. So I resign myself to the fact that that job, as good a fit as it was for me, was not going to happen.

By July, AT&T has completed the acquisition. More and more reductions and relocations are happening. Rather than wait around for that "tap" on the shoulder, I proactively arrange my exit from the company to occur at the end of September – a little control and a nice little severance package. Could be worse.

It is now the middle of August and Heaven only knows what I was thinking!?! No job, no prospects, no real plan. Then the phone rings and it's the Arkema recruiter inquiring as to whether I was still interested in their job. Hmmm, let me think.

Why, yes. Yes, I am. I would like to accept your offer and move seamlessly from one job to the next without missing a beat – or a paycheck – and still get to keep the severance. Thank you very much.

And then it hits me – *looking back*, had Arkema offered me the job when I originally interviewed, I would definitely have accepted, BUT, I would have missed out on a very generous parting gift and enhanced financial stability for me and my family. “Are you there Chris?” It’s me, God.”

Nice, but maybe not enough for you? Let’s go back a little further.

Last week, my wife, Barbara, and I celebrated our first twenty years of marriage. Can I get an “AMEN?!?” In addition to her being beautiful, smart, funny, endearingly silly and interested in me, I also married Barb because she was the only person I had ever met with whom I could envision having a family. And so, that’s what we tried to do for the first few years.

When the “old fashioned” way wasn’t bearing any fruit, we turned to medical science for an assist. Disappointment continued, and after several failed attempts at fertility, we decided it was more important for us to be parents than to be pregnant.

So, we embarked on an adoption plan, which joyously resulted in us becoming parents to newborn Alex.

This is my obligatory, and shameless, “I’m a Father on Father’s Day” slide.

Fast forward 8 or so years.... We’ve moved from the Boston area and have been living in Yardley for about 5 years, relocating for me to accept a new job (and unbeknownst to me, a new life in Christ).

What began as any other day turned into a trip to a nearby emergency room, and then a rather urgent appointment at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (aka CHOP). Our perfect child, 5 years in the making, had a kidney with a congenital defect – secretly shutting down for quite some time.

Surgery was the only option, but not a guaranteed cure.

While a daunting proposition for a pair of first time overprotective parents (and we probably still are), Alex seemed to take it all in stride – and what 8-year old wouldn’t when told that the critical procedure would be performed using the Da Vinci Surgical System.

Yes, that magnificent, medical marvel: CHOP’s version of RoboDoc. This may explain his ongoing fascination with all things technological. And I am very happy (and grateful) to say, like any surgical superhero worth his salt, RoboDoc did not disappoint.

Although I certainly did not realize it at the time, my subsequent evolution into being a *Looking Back Believer* tells me that losing our battle with infertility, leading us to making our family through adoption, and ultimately leaving a perfectly fine job and perfectly fine friends to pursue a new employment opportunity five states away where we knew essentially no one and enabling us to be here, in Yardley, with easy access to the facilities and expertise at CHOP, when our son needed them the most, was not happenstance, but could only be orchestrated – each and every step of the way – from on high.

*“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Jeremiah 29:11*

And now that’s what I have: hope, and a future, and a way to try and live my life.

And while my path is now a little straighter, and a little more focused on people other than myself, that doesn’t mean my faith walk has become a cake walk. Even though I am forgiven, I am still flawed. I still have to make choices.

And those choices will either bring me closer to God or turn me away – even if it’s only a little. Free will is not a free ride. I know I still have work to do.

It's also not lost on me that while I came to Woodside looking for a place for my son, I found a home for myself.

Earlier I mentioned that the death of my father left a hole in my life. No surprise there. What has been surprising (to me, anyway) is how finding God and the very special people at Woodside have gone so far in helping me, healing me and making me whole.

Since I know I could not have found my way back alone, I am compelled to offer a couple of thank you's.

First, to my very inspiring Friday morning Growth Group brothers, in particular Dan, Scott, Al and the two Daves. They teach me something new every time we meet – about the Bible, about being a better and more thoughtful Christian and about myself.

The biggest thank you, however, goes to Kim Engelsman and the members of the Classic Choir – lifting our voices together in song each week brings me more comfort and joy than you (they) will ever know.

So, that is how my faith walk, my jaunt with Jesus, has played out so far. This is my Family Circus now....

And along the way, the result of all these nudges is that I've learned how to *Love God, Grow in Grace, and Share with Others*.

Now, I think, I'm turning my life around again, from being a *Looking Back Believer* to a *Faith Forward Christian*. Looking forward to what God has in store for me. Knowing that I can manage any misfortune, overcome any obstacle, and that I will prosper if I continue to follow Him.

I'd like to leave you with two thoughts. The first is from Proverbs 3, verses 5 to 6.

*Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*

The second is from K-LOVE artist Lauren Daigle.

*"When You don't move the mountains I'm needing You to move,  
When You don't part the waters I wish I could walk through,  
When You don't give the answers as I cry out to You,  
I will trust, I will trust, I will trust in You!"*

My hope is that you will trust, too.