

## Together on the Journey: Don't stop believin'; trusting and listening to the stranger

Tim Schmucker. Sermon for TUMC, March 2, 2025

### I. INTRO

"Jesus help us live in peace. From our blindness set us free"

This 1970s Mennonite camp song is forever etched in my memory. My youth group sang it, not only at camp, but also at almost every youth gathering. Etched in my memory. That's how it is with hymns for me. The tunes and the lyrics are in my being and then lyrics pop up in my consciousness throughout the week. Also with rock music. Especially with rock. So much so that I have this uncanny habit of blurting out a phrase or line of rock lyrics that has some direct relevance to the conversation I'm in or what's happening around me.

Perhaps you have had similar experiences, and perhaps your internal reference library consists of movies rather than rock:

- "May the Force be with you" – Star Wars.
- Or literature: "Not all those who wander are lost"—Tolkien.
- Or scripture: "God helps those who help themselves"—whoa, wait. That was Benjamin Franklin, not the Bible. Ummm.... "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

In any case, my reference library contains hymns and rock songs. So when we the Preaching Team decided that "Together on the Journey" would be the theme for our January-to-Lent sermon series, I couldn't help but immediately think of the classic rock band "Journey" and their mega anthem "Don't stop believin'."

Journey was one of the most successful rock bands of the 1980s. Earlier, however, Journey's keyboardist and lyricist Jonathan Cain had been a struggling musician living on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles. During those difficult times, Cain would call home in despair and each time his father would encourage him saying, "Don't stop believin'."

### SERMON VIDEO #1

Cain grew up in a Christian home; his father was a devout Christian and played a significant role in shaping his faith. In fact, now, decades later, Cain writes Christian worship music for a mega evangelical church in Florida and has released several albums.<sup>1</sup>

"Don't stop believin'." Cain took the phrase his dad had used to encourage him for the title and theme of Journey's biggest hit. And what a rock anthem it was. "*Don't Stop Believin'*" became *the* song that defined Journey, and over the years, it's remained hugely popular.

The characters—a small-town girl and a city boy—represent archetypal dreamers searching for something bigger in life, leaving behind familiar surroundings. They are strangers searching in the night. And the song's train journey symbolises life's uncertainties and the continual pursuit of better opportunities. Don't stop believin' — hope in adversity.

Yet, I find this believin' limited and even naïve. It's believing only in yourself, in your dreams, in your destiny. To be sure, it can be a useful self-motivating mantra to encourage one to keep going when the proverbial going gets rough. And sometimes it's a group that does the "believin'." As a member of the Canadian national hockey team said after defeating the USA in the politically charged Four-Nation finals: "we didn't stop believin'."

The phrase is everywhere. It's a feel-good mantra, a call to keep positive, no matter what. But too often it's reduced to naïve optimism—a kind of passive reassurance that everything will just work out as we want. Really? Don't stop believin'? Even when autocratic billionaires tighten their grip on governments, dismantling democracy? Even when the climate crisis deepens? When economic and political instability threatens livelihoods?

To believe, at its core, means to **trust**. So just believin' that "everything will turn out all right" isn't authentic trust—it's often naïve avoidance. True belief isn't about closing our eyes to reality. It's not just optimism, self-confidence, or a motivational slogan. It is trust—deep, relational trust. For example:

- **I believe in God, the Transcendent;** I trust that no matter what happens we are in God's care.

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<sup>1</sup> Cain is also married to televangelist Paula White, who is Donald Trump's personal spiritual advisor. Both are ardent Trump supporters. But that's a very different story, not relevant for today.

- **I believe in you TUMC**, my faith community; I trust you as we journey together in following Jesus.
- **I believe in my spouse and my family**; I trust her and them with my life. My belief, my trust is a deep commitment.

I invite you later today or this week to give some thought to where your foundational trust lies.

This kind of believin' is not passive. To believe is an action verb. It is an active decision to trust amidst uncertainty. Believin' is not about pretending that things will turn out as we hope they do. It is about choosing trust—trusting in God's presence, in shared life commitments, and in the power of love to sustain us.

## **II. The gospel story of journey from Luke**

Our gospel story from Luke this morning is one of being on a journey, not believing a stranger, and then coming to recognise the stranger's truth. It's a journey toward greater trust and understanding. And changing one's own views and perceptives.

Jesus had been crucified. But then on the third day, women followers of Jesus discovered that his body was not in the tomb. They immediately reported this devastating news to "the men" who considered the women's witness as "an idle tale" and did not believe them. Classic. TUMC women, cue your eyes rolls here.

On that same day, two disciples were traveling on foot to a village called Emmaus, about 11 kilometres from Jerusalem. They were talking about everything that had happened. Their thoughts and emotions were in a whirlwind. Suddenly a stranger appeared and joined them on the road, on their journey. The stranger was Jesus, but they didn't recognise him.

When the stranger asked what they were talking about, the disciples stopped walking, their faces downcast and in shock. "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who is unaware of the things that have taken place there over the last few days?" The stranger—Jesus— replied, "What things?"

They responded, explaining all about Jesus, and that because of his powerful deeds and words, he was recognised by God and all the people as a prophet.... But the authorities sentenced him to death and crucified him. "And we had hoped he was the one who would

redeem Israel.” With voices shaking, the two disciples continued their story: The women, the empty tomb, and the women’s vision of angels who told them Jesus was alive.

Then, after listening carefully, the stranger confronted them — they were dis-believing their prophets. He interpreted for them what scripture said about the Messiah, and why it was necessary for the Christ to suffer.

When they arrived at their destination, the village Emmaus, the stranger was going to continue on his journey, But the two disciples urged him to stay because night was upon them. The stranger agreed. Later, at the dinner table, the stranger blessed and broke the bread, and the disciples immediately recognised Jesus and the truth he had explained to them on the road. They were on a journey toward deeper understanding. After initially seeing Jesus as an oblivious and ignorant stranger, they listened carefully and eventually opened themselves to the truth Jesus shared.

Don’t stop believin’ — in the inherent goodness and humanity of the stranger. They have truth we have not yet seen or heard.

### III. **“The stranger” today**

Strangers are not only people we don’t know. Perhaps you have strangers in your own families, or among your friends and colleagues. I do. People who have understandings of faith or political views that are inconceivable and even abhorrent. Loved ones become strangers. Some of us have family and friends who do not accept or embrace the truth of people who are LGBTQ+. Perhaps some are ardent fundamentalists, or Christian Zionists who fully support the state of Israel. Also, some of us were born and raised in the USA—I grew up in Ohio—and we have family and friends who are Trump supporters. Of course, you don’t have to have been born in the USA to have Trumpites in your circles.

These polar opposite positions have resulted in strained and even broken relationships. Two weeks ago, during our congregational sharing time, I asked for prayer for these relationships. After the service, one of you shared with me in tears that they were experiencing estrangement from their own beloved parents who are ardent MAGA Trump supporters. Estrangement hurts. I’ve stopped talking to some family members about their incredibly harmful hurtful opinions. I want to scream: “How can you reject someone’s truth of who they are? How can you ignore tens of thousands of dead women and children in Gaza? How can you

support Trump when he is going to deport you and your family members? Face the facts. How can you be so ignorant?"

How can we be in authentic relationship with others whom we love, but whose faith parameters and world view are diametrically opposed to what we understand as God's love and kin-dom of love, fairness and justice for all? It seems impossible to be open to the truth of strangers on the journey to Emmaus when they're obviously so very wrong.

This is how I felt after months and years of frequently presenting my loved ones with facts, trying to get them to understand how wrong they were. I confess that I've struggled with the tendency to vilify them.

#### IV. **Mónica Guzmán**

Then I encountered the firsthand experience and thinking of a brilliant Mexican-American woman named Mónica Guzmán, who immigrated to the USA with her Mexican parents when she was little girl. She experienced "being the stranger" in school her first year because she arrived with zero English. As an adult she became a journalist and is currently the director of storytelling at the USA's largest cross-partisan grassroots organisation working to depolarise that country. She calls herself liberal and progressive.

Yet, her work emerged out of the severely strained relationships that opposing political views caused with the people she loved most—her parents who are strong Trump supporters. How's that for cognitive dissonance? Mexican immigrants who strongly support Trump who has demonised Mexican immigrants.

Mónica's work has given me a lot of hope and is transforming how I engage in all these oppositional and seemingly impossible conversations. I want to share with you two of her main points that I've summarised from TED Talks and video interviews, plus her book *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*. Essentially, she changes the framework for having these challenging conversations with "the stranger" — with others who have views that are completely opposed to ours. And undergirding her entire approach is "Don't Stop Believin'". "Don't Stop Believin'" in the basic goodness and humanity of those with whom we vehemently disagree.

1. I've titled her first point "**Curiosity rather than certainty.**" She emphasizes that polarisation thrives on the assumption that "we are right, and they are wrong." I confess that often I

think that. She encourages shifting from certainty about our opinions to curiosity about others. From certainty to curiosity. Instead of assuming we understand someone's stance based on labels and stereotypes, we should explore how they formed their beliefs.

2. Her second point for this morning is that **“Storytelling is part of the journey toward understanding.”** Instead of asking “Why do you believe that?” or “How can you think that way?”— questions that usually feel like judicial cross-examination—Mónica suggests asking inquiringly “How did you come to believe that?” This approach invites personal stories, and thus people feel heard rather than judged. While we may disagree on conclusions, there is always truth in personal experiences.

I will include more of Monica’s summary points in an appendix to this sermon. If there’s just one piece you remember this morning, make it this: Instead of asking a challenging “why do you think that?”, start with curiosity, asking “How did you come to believe that?” Being authentically open to hearing how others have come to believe something often results in “Wow, *I Never Thought of It That Way*” moments.

## **V. In conclusion**

The Mennonite camp song—Jesus help us live in peace—with which we began this sermon is incomplete; what do we do with the fact that:

“Many times we disagree, on what's right or wrong to do

It's so hard to really see, from the other's point of view.”

Mónica Guzmán and her dad, who have had harsh verbal fights and a strained relationship about their political disagreements, offer us in song a how-to addition to “Jesus help us live in peace”. Her dad wrote this song a few months after she published her book.

## **SERMON VIDEO #2**

On our life journeys toward Emmaus, may we not stop believing in the humanity and honest intentions of those with whom we strongly disagree. May we, like the disciples listening to Jesus, open ourselves to hearing their stories. Amen!

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**Appendix: a summary (albeit incomplete) of Mónica Guzmán’s key Ideas and techniques:**

### 1. **Curiosity over Certainty**

Guzmán emphasizes that polarization thrives on the assumption that "we are right, and they are wrong." She encourages shifting from certainty to curiosity, treating people as *mysteries* rather than *puzzles*. Instead of assuming we understand someone's stance based on labels, we should explore how their beliefs were formed.

### 2. **Storytelling as a Tool for Understanding**

Instead of asking "Why do you believe that?"—which can feel like cross-examination—Guzmán suggests asking "How did you come to believe that?" This approach invites personal stories, making people feel heard rather than judged. She highlights that while we may disagree on conclusions, there is always truth in personal experiences.

### 3. **The Role of Trust in Meaningful Conversations**

Guzmán argues that truth alone is ineffective in divided discussions without trust. If someone distrusts the source of information, they are unlikely to accept its validity. Conversations should begin by exploring what is *meaningful* to the other person rather than debating facts immediately.

### 4. **The C.A.R.E. Framework**

Guzmán introduces the C.A.R.E. check to guide constructive questions:

- **Curious** – Driven by a genuine desire to learn.
- **Answerable** – Avoids rhetorical or impossible-to-answer questions.
- **Raw** – Free from judgmental assumptions.
- **Exploring** – Keeps the conversation open-ended rather than leading to a predetermined conclusion.

### 5. **Small Bridges Before Big Ones**

Instead of engaging with the most extreme ideological opponents, Guzmán suggests starting with people who mostly share our worldview but have differences on certain issues. This helps build conversational skills in a less charged environment before tackling more difficult discussions.

### 6. **The Five Conversation Dials**

Guzmán advises adjusting five factors for more productive discussions:

- **Time** – Ensure enough time is available for a full conversation.

- **Attention** – Engage when both parties can focus.
- **Parity** – Create an equal playing field (e.g., avoid one-sided social media arguments).
- **Containment** – Reduce performative elements by keeping discussions private when possible.
- **Embodiment** – Face-to-face communication is more effective than text-based exchanges.

## 7. Curiosity is Contagious

A receptive tone can de-escalate tension and invite mutual curiosity. Smiling, listening actively, and admitting personal uncertainties can encourage the other person to do the same.

Ultimately, Guzmán’s approach is not about changing minds in the moment but about deepening understanding, reducing hostility, and allowing space for growth over time.

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Mónica Guzmán, *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*. BenBella Books, 2022.

Kelly Corrigan Wonders: “Going Deep with Mónica Guzmán on Making Family Work.”

<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/kelly-corrigan-wonders/id1532951390?i=1000642610918&r=2705>

TEDx Seattle: Mónica Guzmán “How Curiosity Will Save Us.”

[https://www.ted.com/talks/monica\\_guzman\\_how\\_curiosity\\_will\\_save\\_us\\_jan\\_2022](https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_guzman_how_curiosity_will_save_us_jan_2022)

TED Audio Collective: How to be a better human. “Conversation with Mónica Guzmán.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yq2CUL0C67E>