

PASTOR'S NOTES

The Gospel of John, Chapter 6, begins with the story of Jesus feeding the multitude, then going off by Himself, then walking on the water to join the disciples and traveling to the other side of the Lake. While they are on the other side, the crowd catches up to Him and He begins teaching about how the feeding was a sign for something more important: the living bread which He offers through Himself. It's not the only time Jesus addresses a crowd and most of the people end up walking away (probably happened in Luke 14:25-33). The Bible tells us that after His "hard sayings" of John 6:

Because of this many of His disciples turned back and no longer went about with Him. So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" Simon Peter answered Him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that You are the Holy One of God."

John 6:66-69

Throughout His ministry, Jesus addresses crowds on multiple occasions, and even once says that to go to the towns and proclaim His message was what He came to do (*Mark 1:38*). He teaches in large group settings a lot, but more of what is recorded in the gospels is His teaching of His disciples. In fact, He even says that there are things they are meant to understand, while the crowds are not (*Matthew 13:11*). Over the years I have taken this to mean that for Jesus, addressing the crowds was largely a way of "fishing" for followers.

After all, what does Jesus typically say to individuals around Him? FOLLOW ME. (*Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 10:38, 16:24, 19:21, Mark 1:17, 2:14, 8:34, 10:21, Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 14:27, 18:22, John 1:43, 10:27, 12:26, 13:36, 21:19, 21:22*)

I do not have the space to talk a lot of Christian history here, but I am struck by how in various points in history, such as the emergence of the Protestants in Europe in the 1500s, and the Great Awakenings in this country from about 1730-1800, there was a revival in the understanding of Christian faith as a "following;" a way of life. In last month's article I suggested that to be a Christian is not just to say that I believe in Jesus Christ, but it means **I intend to live with Him as my Lord (or Master) and to become like Him**. This is not a one-time decision; this is a series of daily decisions (*Luke 9:23* - taking up our cross daily).

Let me put it this way. While Jesus talked to His earliest disciples about being "fishers of men" (*Matthew 4:19, Mark 1:17, Luke 5:10*), we have tended, over much of history, to see preaching the gospel as a kind of "catch and release" fishing. The preacher told some of the story of Jesus that we ponder and appreciate, but that was as far as it went. The preacher earned points for being insightful and interesting, but the people didn't change much. In the world in which I grew up (if I can say I "grew up"), once you were attending a church somewhere it was assumed that you were now a Christian and didn't really need to do much more to be like Jesus - maybe a few minor things, but you were practically there. I suspect this was similar in the 1500s and the 1700s. But what we saw then was the emergence of preachers and teachers who recaptured the idea that preaching was about inviting people to start a new way of life as a follower of Jesus. It is no accident that so many of the Christian denominations emerged in those time periods when people were looking for more than just a weekly message. The world was ripe for small group

ministries like the Methodists and the Evangelical church, from which Maple Street emerged.

All this is just to say the purpose of our gathering together, whether in large groups or in small groups, is to love one another and encourage each other to make those changes (often in small pieces) that make us more like Jesus each day. These days apart from our building, we are challenged with how to do that. However, I suspect that even when we had the freedom to use our church space however we wanted, we were not doing as much as we could toward loving one another and becoming more Christ-like. So for me this time gives us the opportunity to look at ways to do it better.

Regardless of the circumstances, our call to love each other and to become more like Christ hasn't changed. I pray for you to be strengthened today and for all of us to find new ways to build each other up.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a thin black rectangular border. The signature is cursive and appears to read "Kevin".