

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## First Things First

Sunday, January 12

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You've heard the statement, "We need to have a come to Jesus." It's a phrase that comes straight from the history of the pulpit. Preachers get up and tell listeners they need to get right with God and come to Jesus.

Of course, when most people say that today they are usually referring to having a conversation with someone to set things right personally – laying it all out on the table and taking care of whatever issue has become an issue.

Today, I want to have a "Come to Jesus" with you. Not because I feel this church has a problem or issue that needs to be straightened out. Far from it, we are banging on all cylinders. No, I want to have a come to Jesus to prevent a problem from becoming a problem for us. What is that problem? Taking our eye off the ball and forgetting our purpose. Forgetting that the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.

At the end of Matthew before Jesus ascends to the Father, Jesus' last words to his followers were not, "Go and find a comfortable church and attend worship once a month." His last words were not, "Go and sing the songs you like in worship and complain if they won't let you." His last words were not even "Go out and judge those who sin differently than you do."

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples!"

This is called the "Great Commission," not the "Great Suggestion." The church is the only institution in the world that exists for those outside of it. Unfortunately, many churches don't even see it as a suggestion. Instead, it has become the "Great Omission."

This is one of the reasons why the mainline church is struggling to grow. The stats don't look good. The mainline church overall is not replenishing itself with a new generation of disciples. We are not reaching the younger generation. Fewer and fewer churches are bringing even one new person to Christ in one year. Now our church is doing well at making disciples. We are vibrant and healthy church. But I preach this warning today because it is easy for any church to lose sight of its mission.

As Christians, we only have three things required of us: love Jesus, love others and love others to Jesus. We are to be witnesses of Christ in order to bring others into a relationship with Christ. This is the main thing. When churches do this, lives are changed, people get off drugs, marriages are saved, the broken are made whole and communities are transformed. When churches don't do this, we become just another nice charity that does nice things from time to time.

Now, why do Christians and churches have such a problem remembering this? Why do Christians struggle to do the one thing that Jesus asked his followers to do before he left the earth? One word: **distraction**

C.S. Lewis' masterpiece *The Screwtape Letters* is a fantastic book that gets to the truth better than most theological books. The book is a series of letters written from Screwtape, a senior-level demon, to his nephew Wormwood, a younger demon just starting out in the temptation business. In these letters, Screwtape gives advice to Wormwood on how to keep his "patient" (the Christian he has been assigned to tempt) distracted from his relationship with God. Screwtape's advice is diabolically timeless:

*...You will find that anything or nothing is sufficient to attract his wandering attention. You no longer need a good book, which he really likes, to keep him from his prayers or his work or his sleep; a column of advertisements in yesterday's paper will do. ...You can make him do nothing at all for long periods.*

If Lewis were alive today, he might rewrite the last sentence this way: “You can make him do nothing at all for long periods by making sure he creates a Facebook page!”

It's not that the church doesn't know what to do. It does. It's not that the church does not know how to do it. It does. It's not that the church does not have the strength to do it. It does! We have the strength of Christ!

No, the sad fact is the church in general simply gets distracted from its mission of making disciples. It's evil's most effective tool.

For example, every United Methodist Church across this country has been preoccupied by a possible “split” in our denomination. Lately, some United Methodists have been in a frenzy about it given the latest media coverage of it. And the devil is on the floor laughing like crazy because our denomination is getting dangerously distracted from our purpose of making disciples of Jesus Christ.

Let me say that the media in general has not done a very good job reporting on the latest proposal. They made it sound like a split has already occurred. No, it hasn't. Nothing, if anything, is going to happen until May when our General Conference meets to vote on several proposals. General Conference is the only body in our denomination that has the power to decide such matters. So, my message to all of us is “Chill Out!”

We are not going to fix the problems and polarization in the United Methodist Church. And guess what? It's not our job to fix the church. Last time I checked the church belongs to Jesus, and he's got it covered. We need to be at the business of making disciples and leave the rest to God.

I love the United Methodist Church and its contribution to the Christian faith. I love John Wesley and his influence on our faith. But a local church is more important than a denomination. Why? People need our local church, not a denomination. Our community needs our church, not a denomination. Jesus needs our church, not a denomination. People need Jesus, not a denomination!

Our most important task is to become the church Jesus wants us to be – a community that loves Jesus, loves others, and loves others to Jesus. And if we continue to do that, our future is secure, regardless of what happens in May at General Conference. The life our church is not dependent upon that event. For we are the body of Christ, and that will never change. The Spirit of Christ lives within our church and that will never change.

I love the story found in the first chapter of Acts. Jesus is ascending into heaven and his followers are looking up in awe. As Jesus is ascending, he is telling his followers to “go and be witnesses.” And his followers just keep looking up. When Jesus disappears, two men appear and say, “Stop looking up into heaven. Look out in the world and be witnesses for Christ. Stop looking up! Look out!”

Right now too many Christians in our denomination have lost focus and are looking up instead of looking out. They are looking up saying, “Oh my Lord, I am so offended by this...I can't believe this is happening. This upsets me. I don't like what's happening...” All the while Jesus is saying, “Stop looking up; look out! I'm out there in the world, waiting on you to help me change people with my love. Be my witnesses.”

I need you say something that will be helpful to you. It may not be easy to say but it's good for you: **It's not about me; It's about Jesus.**

Now, let me say a word about the elephant in the room, or should I say, the two screens in the room. Most of the church has been very supportive of this media. And most of you who have struggled with it have been very gracious and are keeping an open mind. And I appreciate that.

Our job as the church is to communicate the gospel in the most effective way possible so that as many people as possible can understand it and receive it. So, if that means we put elements of worship on the screen so that the visually impaired can see it, we are going to do that. If a mother is distracted by her kids and doesn't know where in the service or the hymn we are, we will put it up on the screen to help her. If someone who is a visual learner can understand the sermon better with words on a screen, we are going to do it. If people don't bring their Bibles and don't read the one we provide in the pews, we will put scripture on the screen so they can read it. If our sermons are enhanced by using this media and more people come to hear and receive the gospel because of it, we are going to do it. And why is that so offensive?

Now, don't worry. This is still going to be a traditional service. I am not going to start wearing skinny jeans and grow a goatee. The hymnals aren't going anywhere. Our robes aren't going anywhere. Our liturgy and music aren't going anywhere. So you can relax. We are simply enhancing our ability to share the gospel. Again, this is about Jesus and making disciples!

So, how do we get back to that? How do we get back to our mission? How do we get back to being guided by our purpose of making disciples?

The answer is revealed through a humorous but painfully true cartoon in "Leadership Journal." The church secretary is holding the phone, hollering to the pastor in the adjoining room. She says, "A man from Ripley's Believe It or Not wants a picture of someone on fire for the Lord. Do we have one?"

You see, we must get back to our first love. Remember how excited you were when you first heard about and experienced Jesus's love. You couldn't wait to share it.

Brandy and I were once having dinner at a new restaurant with some friends of ours. It was a new restaurant. The food was excellent, and so was the service. After dinner, our friends said, "We have to tell people about this place!"

How quick we are to share the things we love – a good book, movie or restaurant. Yet, when it comes to sharing the greatest news in the world, mum is the word for many Christians. If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Why do you think the early church was so successful? Why do you think they were adding people to the faith daily? They were not sophisticated people. They hadn't been to seminary. They hadn't read books on church growth and marketing the church. They simply made themselves available to the Holy Spirit. They were on fire with the love of the Lord and people were drawn to it. They had to hear more about it.

Where is our passion and love for God and our passion and love for people? This is what translates! This is what attracts people to Jesus. Believe me, when you forgive when everyone else wants revenge, that makes an impact. When you are loving when everyone else is hateful, that makes an impact. When you don't give up on people when everyone else wants to, that makes an impact.

People respond to real people who have a real love and passion for God! The gospel does not have to be dressed up, dolled up, or given a make-over. The gospel does fine by itself. It always has.

Now I know the idea of being a witness for Jesus and making disciples seems scary to some of you, but it really is not difficult. It doesn't take much to make an impact for Christ.

A colleague of mine recently shared a story with me about a man in his church who has been active there for about 25 years. He is a strong man of faith and a real pillar of the church. My colleague asked him how he became a Christian and started going to church? The man said, "Oh, it was on a golf course. You see, I was paired with a man and his son for a round one day. I didn't know them, but they were the nicest people. I really enjoyed playing golf with them. I had already made another tee time for the next morning, which happened to be a Sunday. So, I asked my new friends, 'Would you like to play tomorrow morning? I really enjoyed playing with ya'll. Let's do it again.' I'll never forget what that

man said. He replied, 'Thank you, but I just think a man ought to be in church on Sunday.' That was 25 years ago, and that one sentence turned my life around."

You see, it doesn't take much to be an effective witness for Jesus Christ. Remember, Jesus has promised to be with us as we witness for him.

He was a young man still living at home. He was rather quiet and kept to himself. One day his coworker found him in the restroom crying. His coworker asked him if he could help. The young man confided in him. He told him that his girlfriend was pregnant, and he had just revealed this to his parents the night before. They are very strict and religious. They screamed at him and said that he had embarrassed them and shamed the family and told him that he should never set foot in their house again.

What did his coworker do? He reached out, put his arm around him and said, "I am sorry that happened to you. I am sure this is difficult for your parents, and I am certain this is difficult for you. But I am a Christian, and I believe that God loves you, and his love will help you through the most difficult situations."

Now how was that coworker able to say something like that? Jesus said, "Go and make disciples and remember I am with you always."

I remember preaching at a youth camp several years ago. The worship service went really late. I didn't

get up to preach until about 11p.m. It didn't help that I had the flu. But it was the last service of the week, and I had to finish. I don't know what I said. I was so sick. I was just trying to get through it. I thought it was the worst sermon I ever delivered.

After the service, a teenage girl approached me. She looked very angry. She said, "I have to find out if something is true." I replied, "What's that?" She said, "You mentioned tonight that God loves me. Do you believe that? I don't believe anyone has ever loved me. My dad left me and my mother abused me, and I moved from one institution to another. I've been sexually abused, neglected, and you are telling me that God loves me?"

I looked into her eyes, and said, "That's right. I know this for certain. God loves you. You want to know how I know? God got up on a cross and said, 'This is how much I love you.'" She paused for a moment and tears began rolling down her cheeks. Then she said, "Well, if God loves me, then nothing else matters. If God loves me, that's all that matters."

Deep down you know there are people all around you who need the love, forgiveness, grace, power, strength and comfort of God in Jesus Christ. Give me one good reason why you wouldn't want to share it? Let's keep our eye on the ball. Let's keep first things first.