

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Getting in Tune Again

Sunday, July 22, 2018

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Luke 6:36-38

Recently, I read about a blue grass radio station in Missouri that received a unique phone call. The caller said to the DJ, "Hello, I am a farmer living alone on my farm. My wife is dead, and my children and grandchildren have moved away. I don't see them very much. There are three things in my life that give me comfort. One is the farm. Two is my radio. The third is my fiddle. Sometimes, in the night when you are playing songs that I know and love, I get out my fiddle and play along with you. It brings me great comfort. But recently my fiddle has gotten out of tune. The A string doesn't work like it should, and I don't have a tuning fork, so there is no way I can get my fiddle back in tune. Would you mind playing the note A on your next program? If you will do this, I can tune my fiddle." So the station played the A note, and he tuned his fiddle, and they all lived happily ever after ("Getting in Tune Again" by Bill Self).

Fiddles are not the only thing that can get out of tune. Churches can too. Churches can forget why they exist and play the wrong note in the world. It doesn't happen all at once. It is rather insidious. Church business slowly replaces the business of the church. Budget concerns begin to override kingdom concerns. The past becomes more important than reaching people in the present. Without realizing it, a congregation settles for *doing* church, rather than *being* the church. They are out of tune.

You probably know the story about the little boy who went to church with his grandparents. His grandmother sat in the choir. It really disturbed her to see grandfather nod off to sleep every Sunday in the middle of the sermon.

Finally, she decided on a plan. She gave her little grandson fifty cents each Sunday morning to poke grandpa in the ribs whenever he fell asleep. This plan worked until Easter Sunday morning. The

church was packed. Grandmother was sitting in the choir. She noticed grandfather nodding off. However, Tommy made no effort to wake him. Grandfather even started snoring right there in the crowded Easter service! Still, Tommy did nothing.

After the service, grandmother was quite disturbed. She said, "Tommy what happened? You knew I would pay you fifty cents after the service if you kept grandfather awake." Tommy said, "Yes Ma'am, but grandfather offered me a \$1.00 if I would let him sleep" ("A Service the Church Will Never Forget" by King Duncan).

Some churches would rather just stay asleep than awake to the needs of the world. There may have been a day when they were fine tuned, blowing their trumpet for the gospel, but years of focusing on their power and agenda, instead of on God, has caused them to get tired and check out. They would rather be left alone than be bothered with the mission of making disciples.

Some cynic said, "If it were up to some Christians, churches would have lightning rods on their steeples instead of crosses in memory of that time when lightning struck the early church and as protection against it ever happening again."

The good news is that Johns Creek UMC is not that kind of church. If there is one thing I have sensed from you the last few weeks it is you are a church that hungers to reach people for the gospel. You have a fire in your belly to follow Christ and grow the church. All you need is a little encouragement!

Today, I want to harness your hunger and fine-tune ourselves as we begin a new day of ministry together. Often times when churches go through a lot of change and transition, their equilibrium gets off kilter. They need to find true north again. They need to get in-tune again.

So how do we fine-tune ourselves as a church? We play the A note of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We sing about it, preach about it, pray about it, and talk about it. You see, the church exists to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We exist to spread the good news of God's redeeming love of Christ so that all people will come experience that love and learn to share that love with others. That's it. It is pretty simple but it is amazing how the church can complicate it, dilute it, or even forget it.

### **Reach Out More Than We Reach In**

Jesus said, **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”** – **Matthew 28:19**

Notice what Jesus did *not* say. He didn't say, “Go therefore and sing your favorite songs in worship.” He didn't say, “Go therefore and find a church you're comfortable with and attend twice a year.” He didn't say, “Go therefore and hangout with Christians who think like you.” He said, “Go and make disciples of *all* nations.” It is the Great Commission. Well, unfortunately, it has become the Great Omission!

Dr. Eugene Brice tells about a guy who toured the world's largest grease factory. They walked through rows of machines with gears turning, wheels revolving, cylinders whirling, belts running, huge motors roaring away. Toward the end of the tour, the guy asked the guide, “What do you do with all the grease you make here? Do you sell it?” The guide said, “Oh, no. We don't sell it. We have to use all the grease we produce to lubricate the machinery here at the factory” (Duncan).

Well, that'll preach! Churches quickly get out of tune when they put all of their energy and time into lubricating their own machinery and ignoring the needs of the community and the world. When a church starts ignoring the needs of the community and world, it is “lights out” for that church.

Johns Creek UMC doesn't have that problem. It is clear through your work today with Rise Against Hunger and other initiatives that you have kept your eye on the ball. You are intentional about reaching out more than reaching in.

Take a look at what the book of Acts says about the early church: “The number of those being added to the early church was increasing daily.” Why do you think the early church grew like wildfire? Because they were constantly enlarging their fellowship. They were continually thinking of ways to reach the world for Jesus Christ.

Inwardly focused churches die, while outwardly focused churches thrive. I'll prove it to you. Go to any church that is dying, and you will find people who are preoccupied with their history and the way they used to do it and why they can't do this and that. They only see themselves. But go to any church that is growing, and you will find people who are always thinking about how to reach people who aren't yet there. Those churches get it!

The church is the only institution in the world that exists for the people who are not a part of it. We have the greatest job in the world. We get to tell people that God loves them and has a plan for them.

Someone once said, “You haven't lived until you live for something bigger than yourself.” This also applies to churches. Churches don't live and thrive until they begin living to reach the world that God so loves.

Here is a question that Pastor Lori posted on Facebook from Pastor's School: If our goal was to please God instead of ourselves, how would we do ministry as a church? That is a question that will fine-tune us.

In addition to reaching out more than we reach in, if we are in-tune as a church we will be inclusive rather than exclusive.

### **Inclusive Rather than Exclusive**

Jesus said, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** – **John 3:16**

Once again, notice what Jesus does not say. He doesn't say, “For God so loved the beautiful people” or “the Christians” or “the Republicans” or “Democrats” or “the United Methodists.” It says, “For God so loved the WORLD.”

We have a myriad of denominations. We also have some churches that can't agree on any of the denominations, so they sit alone as non-

denominational churches. We have churches that determine who is “in” and who is “out” by the kind of language people use about the inspiration of scripture, or how they worship, or how they read the Bible, or how they pray, or how they baptize, or, Lord have mercy, how they vote!

While all this nonsense is going on, Christians are forgetting that Jesus said the world will know we are His disciples, not by how we worship, not by how we read the bible, not by how we pray, not by the denomination we belong to, but by our love for one another.

I believe one of the biggest problems facing the church today is the disparity people experience with Christians who preach love and then act hateful and judgmental. 1<sup>st</sup> John is clear that it is impossible to love God and to hate another person. If we hate another person, we need to examine whether we understand the love of God.

Yes, we must evangelize. Yes, we must be working to make disciples. But we have no right to act arrogantly or exclusively. Remember, in the New Testament, God in Jesus is going to the ungodly. In Jesus’ stories, it is the religiously wrong who get praise. The Good Samaritan is religiously wrong, has the wrong version of the scripture, worships improperly, but in Jesus’ story, he is closer to the Kingdom. In Matthew 8, it is the pagan centurion who has faith greater than any Jesus had seen in Israel. In Luke, it is the Samaritan leper or the ten who were healed who only had faith and were made well (inspired by lecture by Dr. Waite Willis, 1995).

Watch out in the New Testament! The outsiders become the insiders, and the worst of Jesus’ judgments are on those religious folk who think they are the only insiders (Matt 23). Believing that Christianity is the truth and that other religions are not *never* means Christians should hate or despise or condemn people of other faiths. The closer we follow Jesus, the more accepting and loving we are to all people. We must hope for the best for them because God claims them too. Christ died for them too. And, as the Bible makes perfectly clear, there are surprises at the judgment. In Matthew 25, it is those who feed the hungry and clothed the naked that are saved. In Romans 11, Paul makes it clear that all Jews will be saved. If Christ died for them, if there is hope for them, if God is going to treat them in the same way he treats

us, then we better treat them in the same way, hoping that they will also be in the Kingdom (Willis).

We need to remember that the gospel spreads through fascination, not coercion. Madalene L’Engle said that our job is to reflect a light so lovely that other people will do anything to find the source of it.

Here are two examples from Christian groups. One group was exclusive. The other was inclusive. One was out of tune. The other was in tune. One did not shine their light. The other did. Both of these stories come out of Texas where high school sports are almost a religion.

The first one comes from Dallas where two girls’ high school basketball teams played a game. One team was a huge Christian school that had many talented players. The other team was a small high school team with only eight members who did not play very well. At half time, the Christian school was beating the smaller school 59-0.

Well, you would think that since this was a Christian school that they would have some compassion and put their 2<sup>nd</sup> strings in for the rest of the game. But, the coach decided to leave his first strings in, and they beat them 100-0! Everyone cheered. They crushed this small team of girls. However, I believe the coach of the Christian school got it wrong.

Now to the other story. This one is about a football game. It involves Coach Hogan of Grapevine Faith High School in Texas. Grapevine Faith is a hugely successful high school football team with winnings too numerous to name. One night, a little over a year ago, they played a team not as successful – Gainesville State. In fact, they had a losing record, 0-8. And every one of their games was a shutout. They had not scored a point the entire season. Well, the game was to be played at Grapevine’s Faith stadium. And, to make it worse, Gainesville State would not have any cheerleaders or parents in the stands, rooting them on. You see, the full name of this team is Gainesville State Juvenile Penitentiary. The only people coming with them were security guards.

Well, Coach Hogan of Grapevine Faith contacted the parents of his school and the cheer leaders and arranged for half of the cheerleading squad and half of the parents to sit in Gainesville’s section to cheer them on. At half-time, Grapevine

was shutting Gainesville out. Gainesville had not scored a point. In the second half, Coach Hogan of Grapevine put in his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> strings, and Gainesville scored two touchdowns! They went crazy. At the end of the game, Gainesville gave their coach a Gatorade bath. Then, both teams went to the middle of the field and had a prayer.

When asked about this game, Coach Hogan said, “Imagine being beaten down your whole life, told you would never be anything. And then, imagine what would happen if someone started to believe in you.” The coach of Gainesville met with Coach Hogan after the game and said, “You will never know how much this means to my boys. You will never know.”

As Gainesville was leaving Grapevine, the whole team crammed to one side of the bus to wave goodbye to all the parents who cheered them on. One coach got it wrong; the other coach got it right. One coach was out of tune; the other was in-tune (I am grateful to Adam Hamilton for these stories.)

I love our tag line, “Come Make Yourself at Home.” Everyone who walks on our campus is a child of God! Do we believe that? If we do and live it out, this church will grow.

If we are in-tune as a church, we will also show mercy instead of judgment.

### **Show Mercy Instead of Judgment**

Jesus said, **“Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”** –Luke 6:37-38

**“Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”** – Luke 6:36

One of the problems with Christians and churches today is they get angry with people simply because they sin differently than they do. Too many Christians today are known for their judgment

instead of their mercy. They are known for their hate instead of their love for one another. Many non-Christians see Christians as hypocritical, judgmental, heartless, arrogant, and close-minded. That doesn’t sound like Jesus, does it?

I remember having a conversation with a friend of mine who is a recovering alcoholic. He is a follower of Christ and active in a church. He said to me, “The only thing I miss about being an alcoholic is the fellowship I had at the local bar. They always accepted me and never judged me. I could share anything. They had heard it all. I felt understood and affirmed.” Then he asked me, “Why can’t the church be more like that? Isn’t that how the church is supposed to be? Like a bar? But instead of dispensing liquor it dispenses grace?”

He was right. I think one group that exists today that is a good model for us as a church is A.A. Many of those who attend A.A. feel at home. The church could learn a lesson or two from A.A.

A friend of mine shared something with me about Lee Strobel, the popular Christian apologist. Strobel was an atheist journalist who converted to Christianity after examining the evidence of the Christian faith. He has written several books and speaks all over the world.

Strobel often tells the same true story at the end of his messages. The story is about a young adult he was trying to convert. Strobel presented argument after argument to her, and she wouldn’t budge. Finally, he got word that she converted to Christianity. So, Strobel called her up and asked proudly, “Which thing did I say that convinced you. What argument did it?” She replied, “Sorry, you are not the one who convinced me. No argument convinced me. What moved me to be a Christian were my Christian friends who loved me and never judged me. I saw Jesus in them, and I wanted what they had.”

We will be in tune as a church when people see Jesus in us and want to experience his love for themselves. We will be in tune when we reach out more than we reach in, when we are inclusive rather than exclusive, and when we show mercy instead of judgment.



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