

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb:

And all of God's people said?

Audience:

Amen.

Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb:

It is a holiday weekend, Labor Day, and a lot of people are on the road today and tomorrow, and I am so glad I am not on the road. Amen? But there is one road that I have traveled a great deal over the years, and that is 75 north and south from Atlanta to Tampa, Tampa to Atlanta, on and on and on because I have lived in both places and I have family and friends in both places. My gosh, as I was a teenager, I have traveled up and down that road over and over again. I can tell you the best Dairy Queens to stop at, that's actually in Leviticus. When you're on a trip, you have to stop a Dairy Queen. I can tell you the cleanest restrooms and I always seem to stop at the same darn Chick-fil-A every time I go. Ever done that? You don't plan it, but you end up stopping there somewhere around Valdosta, I think. But over the years I've become very familiar with the billboard ads along the highway. My gosh, they advertise everything from pecan logs to houses of ill repute.

And over the years I've become very fascinated with one kind of ad, and that's the ad or those are the ads that advertise Christian radio stations. Ever seen those? Usually they picture a happy middle class family and they're laughing in a park or laughing on their couch at home and usually they give the number of the radio station and then there is a slogan, "Safe for the whole family, safe for the whole family." Well, that's nice and all, but whoever created that ad does not know or did not remember what Jesus had to say to us in our scripture lesson for today. Because one of the things we learned in our scripture lesson for today is Christianity and following Jesus is a lot of things, but safe is not one of them. Adventurous? Oh, yeah. Fulfilling? Heck yeah. Risky, definitely. But safe, not so much.

And one of the reasons why following Jesus Christ is not all that safe and is sometimes challenging and risky is because there is a power at work in the world that does not want us to succeed and that power is evil. And if you don't believe evil exists, just take a look around in our world. Oh my gosh, what evil has done pitting us against one another, ideologically, politically, theologically. Hate against hate, hurting one another. It is all over the place. The good news is however that evil is lost, one of the things that was accomplished on the cross was that Jesus Christ defeated evil and all we're doing now, it's just a mopping up effort until the kingdom of God fully comes. But until that time, evil is a very, very sore loser and evil is going kicking and screaming into defeat.

And so our job as followers of Jesus Christ, what we're called to do as those of us who claim to follow Jesus Christ, is that we are thrown headlong into the pity party of evil to announce to evil and this world that God and his love reign supreme. God and his sacrificial forgiveness revealed in Jesus Christ is the only power in this world that will save this world, that will heal this world, that will transform this world. And sometimes that is very risky business. But now is the time, we as the church need to recommit ourselves in this world that has seemed to gone mad to that task of what is most important, to that task of reminding the world of the love of God in Jesus Christ that does reign supreme.

We have to commit ourselves and recommit ourselves. Now during the Revolutionary War, George Washington had an abundance of what he called summer soldiers. Soldiers that were just there for the summer months. But as winter came and rations were in short supply and blankets became scarce, many, many of the soldiers would quietly slip away from the camp and return to the warmth of their homes. And finally, Washington was so exasperated by all this that he would say, "We cannot win a war

with summer soldiers." Boy, that's the truth. And I'll tell you this church as sure as I stand here and preach, the church cannot be a church with summer Christians. We cannot do kingdom work transforming this community with the love of God with summer Christians. We need to recommit ourselves. Now, in many ways, I'm preaching to the choir because only the beautiful and faithful people show up on a Labor Day weekend at church.

But it needs to be said because when we choose comfort and convenience over the gospel of Jesus Christ, people go unloved. Lives go unchanged. The work of the church is not done. Let me say a word right now because we all have heard of the Delta variant of COVID. But I have noticed recently that there is another variant that's out there. Have you heard of it? It's a spiritual variant. It's called church apathy.

Now, I need to say a word about this because many folks in this time and place, well honestly, COVID has caused people to get out of the habit of going to church, of continuing in their spiritual habits. And I talked to many of my colleagues and pastor friends, and it seems like throughout this country it has happened. That many people have chosen the couch over coming to worship and being part of the body of Jesus Christ. Now, I know in fairness I need to say that many people can't come because of health reasons and I respect that and I support that. And some folks are just trying to be very cautious given the circumstances of their lives. But I know there are some folks who need to be here because the church needs them and they need the church.

And I get it. I know. Believe me, I'd rather preach from the comfort of my couch wearing pajamas, although you probably not want to see me like that, but it's human nature. And I've talked to people that they have confessed, they have admitted. We've gotten out of the habit. A lot of our spiritual habits, COVID has caused that. And we need to get back into church. We need to get back into our spiritual habits. We know it's important. We know it's important for us. We know it's important for our kids. Because you see, you can't serve from the sofa as someone once said. You can't experience the community of believers from the sofa. And also we as Christians, we're not consumers, we're contributors. Someone said, "We don't watch, we engage, we serve, we sacrifice, we commit." And I love the fact that we have technology that keeps us connected as people, but it will never replace being physically part of the body of Jesus Christ, giving our prayers and our presence and our gifts and our service and our witness.

Otherwise, what is this about anyway? We must recommit ourselves to serving Jesus Christ. And so how do we do that? Well, Jesus was very clear in our texts for today about how we do that. When the seven were sent out, he gave marching orders to them and the same marching orders he gave to them, he gives to us. They're not complicated, but they are very powerful. And if we do them, if we follow them, oh my gosh, what we can do is a church of Jesus Christ. One of the first things Jesus mentions in the scripture text today that we are to do, if we are going to commit ourselves the following Jesus, and that is to pray. The first thing Jesus calls his disciples to do is to pray. Say that with me. Pray.

Jesus says this, as he was sending the 70 out in prayers, he said to them, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. The very first thing Jesus says is to pray. If you're going to follow me, you must pray. Now, this may sound very elementary to many of us, but let me ask a question. How many of us can honestly say whenever we embark on doing ministry for Jesus Christ, the first thing we do is pray? Not always. In fact, I've been part of the church for a long time, worked as a pastors a part of the church for a long time, and I can tell you how it sometimes goes.

We plan and plan and we do and do. We're excited about our ideas and what we have accomplished and we get our org charts together and we do this and we do that. And then at the tail end we say, oh yeah, that's right. There's that God thing. Lord, would you bless what we have done? And then we wonder

why people burn out. We're not relying on the power of Almighty God. Instead, we need to be saying, "Lord, this is your church. This is your church. You let us here and apart from you, we can do nothing. So we submit ourselves to you, show us the way."

And that my friends, that's how it happens. I'm convinced that the one single thing that is keeping the church in America from revival, it's prayer. I mean, you look at Jesus' ministry. You ever studied the gospel of Luke? I think I counted one time, I can't remember exactly, but there's at least 15 to 18 references to Jesus' praying. That he prayed, he prayed as he began his ministry. He prayed before he chose his disciples. He prayed before he did miracles. He prayed before he taught. He prayed before he faced the cross. He prayed while he was on the cross. Jesus was a man of prayer, continually praying to the Father.

We should get a clue about that. And if the church is going to be the church that God wants it to be, it needs to be a church of prayer. The church in Asia has taught us this. You think we have big churches in America? Oh my gosh, in Asia, Christianity has spread like wildfire over the years. They put us to shame. They make America look like a mission field. It's unbelievable. And their secret, if you want to call it that, it's not really a secret. The reason why there's revival, a representative came to America some time ago and said it plainly in an address. He says, what we do is we are a church of prayer. And so they asked him, well, how can the church in America experience the same revival? And he said, get up every morning at 5:00 AM and pray.

Is it really that simple? Many years ago, and you're going to find this hard to believe the right Reverend Allen and I when we were in Florida, we visited a monastery that was supposed to be completely silent. Can you imagine that? It was a Benedictine monastery filled with silent monks. It was a good exercise for me, and there was a few moments we were allowed to speak. It was that breakfast. And I'll never forget asking a particular monk. I said to them, and again, I'm completely ignorant, I said, "what do y'all do here exactly? What do you here?" The monk, very patient, in a very holy manner, simply said, "Well, sir, we believe our job is to pray. God has called us to pray, to pray for you, to pray for the church, to pray."

The old Celtic Christians used to talk about going to a thin place, that place of prayer and devotion and spirituality that we find where the wall between us and God is so thin that the love and power of God is able to penetrate it and envelop us and empower us. If we want to follow Jesus Christ in a powerful way, we must first be a people of prayer. But there's another thing Jesus said in this text. Not only must we pray if we're serious about all this, we also must proclaim. Twice in our passage four today, Jesus said as he calls out the 70, you must proclaim the kingdom of Almighty God. You must show the world that God's way is better than the world's way. You must show the world by what you say and how you act that the love of God reigns supreme. You must embody that. Now, that doesn't mean that every Christian should find a pulpit and preach, but it does mean our lives should be a sermon. As the old saying goes, I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day.

Have a good friend in ministry who likes to talk about the time when he was growing up in his neighborhood and he said he loved the neighborhood, he loved his friends. They had a good time just running around being crazy on their bikes, back in the day, of course, when you could just stay out until it was time for dinner and parents never worried. But he said there was one particular neighbor that lived near to us, he said, who was a widower and he was a mean man. He didn't talk to us much. And whenever he did, it was like, get off my lawn and other things like that.

He didn't seem to like kids around the house. He just wasn't very happy. They tried to stay away from him. Well, my friend said it. It came time as the years went past that this man, this widower couldn't mow his lawn anymore. He'd gotten too old. And so the neighbors around him decided they didn't get permission. They just simply decided that they would take turns mowing his lawn. And they did that for a very, very long time. They never saw the man hardly. They just kept mowing his lawn. Never heard a

word from him. Then one day they were in church, he said. He said, he'll never forget this. And he saw that widower walk into their church with a cane.

They were speechless. And after the worship service, when they finally got to talk to him, they were like, "We never seen you here before. What's going on?" And he said, "I know. I know I haven't been very nice to y'all. I know, but what you've done for me and cutting my lawn has really touched me. And I began thinking about that. And then I began to think that almost every single Sunday I see y'all get into your cars in your Sunday best and go to church. And I don't know, I just wanted to see what all the fuss is about that makes you act the way you do."

You know what Mother Teresa said? "Let no one ever come to you without leaving better or happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness. I love the prayer of St. Francis, something we ought to repeat every day, right? Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Whether it is hatred. Let me so love. Whether it is injury, pardon. Whether it is doubt, faith, whether it is despair, hope, whether it is darkness, light, whether it is sadness, joy. Amen. Oh, divine master grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console, to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love, for it's in giving that we receive. It's in pardoning that we are pardoned. It's in dying to self that we are born to eternal life."

If we're serious about this following Jesus business, we will pray and we will proclaim with our lives. But there's another thing this text shares with us that Jesus tells us, not only to pray and proclaim, but we need to party, to praise God with joy. Can you say joy? Say, joy. Joy. Boy, do we need joy? That's what the text says. "The 70 return from serving, they returned with joy and they were rejoicing in all that they were able to do. But the Lord said, don't rejoice that you've been so effective. Rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, Jesus was saying, rejoice that you're on the winning team. Rejoice that God has overcome this world. Rejoice that you personally have the good news in your life and spread that and share that. Joy. We need to remember that, that God has conquered evil. And now more than ever, my gosh, do we need joy or what.

And Al and I, we had lunch the other day with a friend of ours who works in the church. If there's one thing Al and I are good at, it's laughing. We have joy. And he said to us, "Listen, even in the office I work at, even though I'm surrounded by Christian people, there is no joy. They don't laugh, they don't smile. And I knew if I had lunch with you guys, I know I would laugh." Where's the joy? The celebration of what we have? I remember an Irish comedian was on the Tonight Show many years ago, and he talked about growing up in Ireland as a youth. And he said his favorite part of growing up in church in his Roman Catholic church and doing mass was that he loved the fact that the priest was called the celebrant of the mass, the celebrant. But then he said, "But I never knew why that he never in the midst of that solemn atmosphere, because he was the celebrant, didn't just stop what he was doing and say, 'Whoopy.'"

I'll tell you one of the things I love about this church as I served is this is a happy church. Before COVID, this is a happy church and it's still a happy church. I believe that. But we need to remember that. We need to find our joy and stop allowing COVID to steal our joy. Jesus said, "I have overcome the world." And let's be honest, we're going to get through this and maybe some of you need to hear this today. We're going to get through this. And when we come out on the other side, we need to be ready as followers of Jesus Christ, we need to be ready and resourced by God's power to continue his work. The church is too doggone important.

Our faith in Jesus Christ is too important. Abbott Joseph was a famous desert father who lived back in the fourth century, lived in the desert. And his job mainly was to consult and give wisdom to other monks, younger monks. And one time a disappointed Monk came to see him who had tried everything, had done everything he was told, but still he felt something was missing. And so he went to Father Joseph and said, "Father Joseph, listen, I have prayed and I have fasted and I have read scripture, and

I've gotten rid of impurities in my heart. What more shall I do?" And as the old story goes, at that moment, Abbott Joseph spread out his fingers and they became like tin lamps of fire. And as that young monk stood in amazement Abbott Joseph said, "Why not be totally changed into fire?"

I dare you as Johns Creek United Methodist Church to be the exception right now in this community and world. Instead of sowing hate, sow love. Instead of just giving an opinion, give your kindness and encouragement. Remind the world that God is still in charge and God has overcome this world. And we will come out of this. Remind the world by the way you live your life of the love of God. There is nothing greater than the love of God. This world desperately needs it. It's time to get back into gear. Let's pray.

Oh, Lord Jesus, remind us what's most important today. And that's why we come here because we so easily forget it, what our priorities should be. Reignite in us a fire for you, for your love. Open our eyes to the needs around us. We want to be your followers because we know there is nothing better. There is nothing more exciting. There is nothing more adventurous or fulfilling in this world than following you.