

Two thousand years ago, several fishermen were approached by a man people had been calling “Teacher,” and that others had been calling a prophet. But the fishermen concluded He was the Messiah and began to follow Him. What they thought the Messiah had come to do, and what He had actually come to do, were two different things however. That is because those disciples (along with the other disciples the Teacher would soon call to follow) thought He had come to mount a horse, wield a sword, and restore the throne of David to power in an earthly kingdom. Which is why Luke told in us last week’s reading from Acts that after Jesus had risen from the dead, they asked “*are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*”)

Not that they are alone in failing to realize that the Messiah had come to usher in a spiritual kingdom so He could rule in the hearts and minds of ALL people in ALL nations. Christians today can enter into relationship with the Great Fisherman but fail to understand their calling to be “*fishers of men,*” as we saw in the video of the “Crossway Fishing Club.” Christians today can choose to follow the Heavenly King who said to Pilate “*My kingdom is not of this world*” but seek to build their own kingdoms instead. And Christians today can pay homage to the Divine Sovereign who said to Pilate “*My kingdom is from another place*” but only see that homage as attending the meetings of the fishing club rather than going out to fish for people.

While God did not send a pandemic into the world, as the Bible tells us God never sends evil, maybe that is why He may have allowed such a thing to occur however. For God sometimes uses chaos to move us out of the fishing club and into being “*fishers of men.*” That is because when we only make the commitment to attending meetings IN the fishing club, and do not go OUT to fish, we can open ourselves up to all sorts of self-centered behavior. We can come to see the church property as our personal possession rather than the launching place from which to reach new people with the gospel message. We can come to see the church budget as something to cater to OUR desires and not to meet the needs of OTHERS. And we can come to see the fishing club as a place to merely TALK about fishing, but not be equipped to actually fish for men. We see the tragic result of this in at least three issues swirling around us at this very moment.

The first goes back to the founding of our nation, and was spoken about in 1960 when Martin Luther King said in a “Meet the Press” interview that “*one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, [is] that 11 o’clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hour, in Christian America.*” For despite the passage of time, the Church is still not in many ways any less racist than our nation.

The second goes back to 1972 when the United Methodist Church’s General Conference delegates changed the Book of Discipline to ban certain persons from being involved in the life and ministry of the Church because of their sexual identity. For despite the advances of scientific knowledge about identity formation and sexuality, much of the Church is seemingly still not aware of that information.

And the last issue began 18 months ago when a pandemic hit the world. For rather than leading a movement to act like “*one nation under God*” by loving our neighbor through wearing a mask,

physically distancing, and getting immunized, the church has been divided, paralyzed by conspiracy theories, and - in many ways - lacking in remorse that 700,000 people have died.

That's the bad news. But there is good news. Two thousand years ago, a man who some called a "Teacher" and others called a "prophet" walked up to several fisherman and said "*Follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people,*" and they not only "*left their nets and followed him,*" they actually went out to "*fish for people.*" Not that they were perfect in doing that at first.

At first they thought the Messiah had come to usher in an earthly kingdom. And while Jesus repeatedly told them otherwise, they were slow to let go of that expectation - even asking Him after He rose from the dead "*are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*" But they eventually did understand. They eventually did realize that the Good News is that Jesus promises to reveal to us what we need to know to follow Him. And they eventually did figure out that Jesus offers to help us see the things we need to see to be effective in fishing for people.

That Good News did not end with those early disciples however. We modern Christians can also get past human frailty. We modern Christians can also move beyond misunderstandings. And we modern Christians can also grasp not only what Jesus meant when He said to Pilate "*My kingdom is not of this world*" but also how that fact applies to how we use our fishing club as a launching point to fish for people. Which is important for us to do because all kinds of things can get in the way of us "*fishing for men.*" We can, as I said, allow our minds to be tinged with racist thoughts. We can have old world ideas of sexuality that do not match what scientific facts tell us. And we can allow our commitment to earthly kingdoms to hold more sway in how we live than the heavenly kingdom we say we want to reside in forever.

The biggest mistake we can make, however, is the one we are looking at today from the book "The Post-Quarantine Church." That is because in the chapter titled "Gather Differently and Better," we see that the biggest mistake we can make is to see our commitment to follow Jesus as only including attending the meetings of the fishing club and not going out to fish for people. To see how to correct that mistake, we need to turn back to what we were told by Matthew about a conversation Jesus had with His disciples about "the Church." For, as a well-known hymn reminds us, "*the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place, THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE.*" To see what kind of people that hymn is talking about, and the thoughts of Jesus that hymn echoes, let's turn to the words of Jesus in Matthew.

As we do so, the first thing we see is that Jesus asked the disciples "*Who do you say I am?*" That is because it did not matter what others believed. Each disciple had to decide themselves. Each disciple had to place their trust in Him. And each disciple had to declare that they not only placed their trust in Him, but were willing to let Him be the KING of THEIR lives. The same reality is true for us, especially if we want the "Post-Quarantine Church" be everything God wants it to be. For God said through Jeremiah long ago that "*I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" And that fact has not changed. Which means first thing WE need to do is to say to Jesus "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

But we can't stop at that declaration.

That is because the second thing we see is that Jesus said "*on this rock I will build my church.*" For the church is not just a human organization, although it is made up of humans. Nor is the church just an earthly institution, although it operates in the here and now of this world. According to Paul in several of his letters, the Church is the Body of Christ - the living entity through which Jesus continues to be present to the world. Which is why the hymn writer can say "*the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place,*
THE CHURCH IS A PEOPLE."

And not just ANY kind of people, but people of FAITH, people who not only have said to Jesus "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,*" but also have sought to do so by laying down their lives and picking up their cross in such a way that people see JESUS in them. Which is why John tells us in his gospel that Jesus said "*when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself.*" For when His disciples live in sacrificial and cross-shaped ways, Jesus is able to build up His church, and as people see Him in the built up church, He says they will want to enter into relationship with Him through it. But we can't stop at this cross-shaped way of living.

That is because one additional thing we see is that Jesus said was "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" While we think of keys as symbols of power or control because they determine who gets in and who is kept out, that is not what Jesus was speaking about. That is because "*binding*" and "*loosing*" in Judaism are phrases that speak of someone like a rabbi having the authority of the community to determine whether something is allowed by the Law or forbidden by the Law. Thus, "*to bind*" something is to declare it forbidden by the Law, and "*to loose*" something is to declare it allowed by the Law.

This means Jesus was saying that He (the true "Teacher" of what is "*bound*" and "*loosed*") was passing on His authority as "*the Christ, the Son of the Living God*" to teach people what God says is right and what ways God says is wrong - not because they would now have the ability to make that determination on their own, but because the Holy Spirit would reveal to them how God has things arranged in heaven. Which may be the most important part of being a "*fisher of men.*" That is because we are not just trying to get people to believe that Jesus is "*the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" And we are not just trying to get people to live in sacrificial and cross-shaped ways. We are seeking to so work with God that His will and kingdom are bought about "*on earth as it is in heaven.*" That is because in heaven, everything runs as God wills it to run.

In heaven there is therefore no pain, no suffering, and no death. In heaven everything is as God originally created it to be. So, by not only learning ourselves what is "*bound*" on earth and what is "*loosed*" on earth, but fishing in such a way that we teach others to do so as well, we work with God in a way that as many people as possible are "*raised to life.*" And when we don't live in such ways, we not only fail to raise people to life, but - as we see in Tom Rainer's book - stop being the fishing club because we stop fishing. Which leads to failure and disappointment.

We see an earthly example of what this failure looks like in the story of a woman who applied for a job. At the end of her interview, she was hired. When the personnel director asked if she had any questions, the woman asked “*Do you offer health insurance?*” “*Yes,*” the personnel director said, “*but part of the cost is deducted from your salary.*” “*Oh,*” the woman said, “*My last company covered the cost.*” “*In addition,*” the woman said, “*they paid for life insurance, dental insurance, unlimited sick leave, a month’s vacation, a Christmas bonus, and child care.*” Puzzled at why the woman left such a job, the personnel director asked “*Why did you leave?*” “*Because,*” the woman said, “*the company went bankrupt.*”

In a similar way, when the church becomes nothing more than a fishing club, and fails to “*fish for men,*” it becomes spiritually bankrupt. As a result, thousands of spiritually bankrupt churches close each year. But according to Jesus in the passage from Matthew, that does not have to happen. Jesus promised that when we follow His teaching, obey His instructions, and keep the priority of being “*fishers of men*” as our top priority, “*the gates of hades will not prevail.*”

As we move through this next year, the Leadership Team invites you to therefore pray with us for God’s guidance. We invite you to pray about where you fit into helping us “*fish for men*” in new and exciting ways. And we invite you to pray that we might together continue to use the “*fishing club*” God has given us in faithful ways. That is because as we seek to be the “*Post-Quarantine Church*” God calls us to be we will need to gather DIFFERENTLY and BETTER. Gathering DIFFERENTLY may take on new forms and methods that we have not even thought of yet. And gathering BETTER might include being more intentional about why we gather. As this happens, and we struggle through how nervous it makes us feel, we might want to take advice from a line in “*The Chosen*” when Jesus tells Peter “*GET USED TO DIFFERENT.*”