

Sermon Text: Mark 6:1-13

I was talking to Graham Rogers about a week ago, and he said that he tried, on his little TV, to follow the Atlanta Braves. Tried to pull for them, but it was hard because they keep losing, but also because the players, he said, don't have any team loyalty. Everyone seems to be a free agent, and they will wear whatever uniform gives them the best deal.

Now, the same is happening to churches across America. Churches were once the most stable organizations in the community. You stayed and you prayed and you supported and you built up your little part of the Kingdom of God as best you could in good times and in bad. You did it because you said you would when you took the membership vows. In other words, you kept your word even if the preacher was wordy, don't Amen that, and the Sunday school teacher was dry as dust. You kept your word. That was where you were planted, and that is where you grow.

Lyle Schaller, a church-growth author of some renown, said that the loyal member born before 1940 is upset and baffled when a longtime church member becomes dissatisfied and quietly departs to go worship in another church, in another denomination in the same town. It baffles folks born before 1940. They have a different idea about the seriousness of church membership. Younger members, who are reared on a culture overflowing with choices, shrug that off as acceptable and okay. There's no loyalty to stay at a congregation, and help it with your gifts and your time and your talent and your treasure. People born since the 40's don't even care about what kind of church. They care only about what the church can do for them according to statistics. “American Demographics” magazine observed in their April 1999 edition that religion and spirituality has become just another product in the broader marketplace of goods and services. I don't like the way that sounds, that we're just another product in the marketplace of goods and services.

These days adults will flip from one church to another in the same way they might hunt for the best deal on a car or sales to buy something. Which church has the best childcare? Which church has my favorite style of music? Which church has the strongest recreation or youth program or is the friendliest? Which church gets out first for lunch? I know that's a factor.

Denominational loyalty has become a thing of the past, and this is interesting, even within denominations. You may not know this, but it's true. When I was being trained as a church growth consultant back some ten years ago, maybe 15 years ago, this is when this happened. The Southern Baptist Convention did a nationwide survey, and they found that the name “Southern Baptist” among people who were likely church attendees was a negative. It was a negative in their surveys. What did they do? They started many, many new churches, even some in South Carolina, without the name “Southern Baptist” on their signs, without “Southern Baptist” mentioned anywhere in the name. They might be called community worship centers or community churches. Some folks, it is said, did not even realize they were joining a Southern Baptist church until after they had joined. Now, does that matter? Maybe not, maybe not.

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If we hear and take to heart the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a particular church then we should stay in that church and grow where we are planted. That's my opinion. There ought to be a sense that there is something bigger and more important going on than just the name of the church or the worship style or who preaches there. If the Gospel is preached there, if the seed of hope and new life is planted there, that matters! If you have that seed, you ought to grow where you are planted.

The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians spoke of human distinctions in your church following and where you go and what preacher you like and what style you like. He said that the human distinctions and fashions were a sign of immaturity. In 1 Corinthians 3, he said, “Brethren, I could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes or babies in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food for you were not ready for it and even yet, you are not ready for solid food for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, in behaving like ordinary men?” In other words, Christians should behave like extraordinary men and women, not ordinary men. He says, “For when one says I belong to Paul, and another says I belong to Apollos, are you not nearly men? What then is Apollos and who is Paul? Servants only through whom you believed as the Lord assigned to each. I planted. Apollos watered, but God gave the growth so neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything at all, but only God who gives the growth.”

He says some are babes in Christ, and can handle only milk and are not ready for solid food or tough issues or real unity under Christ. You know, one way that Paul in the New Testament talks about the church is the “body of Christ.” “Is Christ's body divided?” There are so many denominations. There are people who are so set in their ways that they define the worship of God by their own comfort zone. Now, think about that! That seems a little, a little much. The God who created Heaven and Earth, Christ whose glory fills the sky, the only help in life and death, but this God – who is omnipresent and larger than all there is or was or will be – can be worshiped only in the way that makes you comfortable?

You know in the Old Testament it talks about King David stripping down to a loincloth and dancing before the Lord until he was exhausted. It was true worship. I'm not going to be doing that today! Thank you. I don't know what it means that those behind me were clapping the most. I don't intend to do that, but there are times, and just listen, there are times when I wish I could drop a little bit of my of my practiced upper middle class decorum and praise God a little more freely. Maybe not as David did, but just a little more freely.

Then there are those who stand with one foot out the door if we did begin to praise God a little more freely. There are those who have been offended by my attempts at humor. I probably have done it just now. I apologize. When you are dealing with messages of life and death and life eternal, sometimes it seem appropriate to have a little bit of a light moment before we dig right back down into the spiritual meat that is tough and hard to

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hear. Other times, when I realize what a wonderful message the Gospel is, I want to laugh. I do want to laugh. God loves me? Me? As we sang in “Amazing Grace,” a wretch like me? God loves you, no matter your sin, no matter your actions, no matter your thoughts and your wandering desires, no matter your failure to act; God keeps giving His amazing grace. He accepts us as His children knowing that we are sinners, embraces us and forgives us and this is important, and sends His spirit to grow us up into the men and women we were intended to be. The growth part is so important and so under-emphasized. Maturity in faith means bearing spiritual fruit. Unity under Christ is the beginning of spiritual growth instead of jealousy and strife and contentiousness, which Paul was addressing to those in the Corinthian church.

Growing where you are planted and understanding yourself, whatever denomination, as a part of something so much larger than one church or one preacher or one choir or one name on a sign. You may grow here or you may grow there, but you’re not going to grow if you keep changing teams and fail to see yourself as a part of the very Kingdom of God coming into the world. We’re a part of something huge! Not just Main Street United Methodist Church!

Growth is not going to happen if we keep hopping around and shopping around for the best deal. People don’t grow that way, and churches don’t grow that way. We grow the Kingdom of God by maturing our older members and by making new disciples, not by moving them around from transfer to transfer, to church to church. The world needs God’s church. What we do is too important to be taken that lightly. Some hop and some stop the first time something displeases them. What in the world gave people the impression that the church exists to please them? I hope it wasn’t a preacher, but I’m pretty sure it was. The church does not exist to please you. We, the church, are not here to serve you. We are here to give you a place to worship and serve God. We are not here to serve you as individuals, but to give you a place to worship and to serve God. That’s when the growth and the unity take place.

The Gospel today talks about Jesus giving His disciples the power to heal and cast out demons and make people whole. He empowered them, and then He sent them out two by two, and He gave them specific instructions to stay at the first home that took them in as long as they were in that town. Now what does that mean? I think it means that if you’re in a town, and you’re a disciple sent out by Jesus, and you get a better offer to move from a one-star accommodation to a four-star accommodation, you don’t do it! You don’t move to the better house. You stay at the first house that invited you in, be it ever so humble! You stay where you were invited the first time. You don’t move from location to location. Your comfort is not of first importance.

Jesus is telling them that what is important is that you not insult your host. He’s telling the disciples that these people trusted you; they heard gladly the Gospel you preached, and they gave you a roof over your head. You stay there as long as you’re in that town. They were to stay in the first place which invited them in.

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You know, a little off topic, but invited is a very good word. Even today among all the adult church members who actually join a church for the first time, it happens almost exclusively because somebody, some lay person, invited them. I hope that United Methodists, as shy as we sometimes are, still invite people to worship, to come hear why it is that we worship, and who it is that we worship, and welcome them when they come. I hope we still do those things.

One of my former members used to tell a story about a family in town that just never went to church. There was a husband and wife and three or four children, and the reason they said they never came to church was that they said, “We just don’t have the proper clothing. We would feel out of place.” The lady telling the story was a woman of great wealth, and she told the family to go down to such and such and store, and she would pay for whatever they wanted for Sunday outfits. So they took her up on it, and they went, and they bought the clothes. That Sunday, the lady who paid for them, waited and the hour was struck and the prelude was played and a hymn was sung and the family never showed up. Finally, after lunch, the lady called the father and the husband of the family, and said, “We were expecting you at church today.” The man said, “I know, I know, I know, but we got all cleaned up and we got all dressed up and we put on our new outfits and we looked so good that we decided to go the Episcopal Church.”

Folks choose churches for all kinds of odd reasons not related to God. I’m going to tell you a true story you won’t believe, but it is true. I met a young man in Charleston where I served as an associate, who said that he wanted to meet a particular woman. He brought the newspaper where it was mentioned in the article that this woman was a member of my church. He said he was there because he wanted me to introduce him to the young lady. He said he was looking for a date. He was a chemist, and had kind of big ears, and was a little awkward and not good with small talk, and he wanted me to introduce him to this woman who was a member of my church. He said he had been attending a Pentecostal church, and he said this, “But all the women there have their eyes closed and they’re waving their hands around, and I can’t get their attention.” He said that. He said he did not think that Methodists would be so involved in worship. He was right. I explained to him that I was not a dating service even though I did feel for him. It was awkward.

People hop from church to church for all sorts of reasons, but rarely is it because they want to worship God more deeply, more truly, and to serve Him in their lives out of appreciation for the amazing grace that God has given us in Jesus Christ. Feel for a moment in your heart the message of the Gospel and what you gain from it. You gain freedom from our past, freedom for our future. It’s possible because of the forgiveness that God has given us in Christ and the power of God in Christ within us through His Holy Spirit to enable us to forgive others, to make peace in those broken relationships we have. If we dig in and grow past our comfort zones, we can become new people.

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Another man I met at a former church told me that his reason for transfer was potential clients for his brand new insurance business. I was impressed by his honesty, but worship of God was not why he came.

Worship is not some boring sermon we sit through once a week. Quiet! Worship is a celebration of our relationship with God, our trust in God, our joy in what God has given us, which we could never earn on our own. Folks ought to, worship ought to be an expression of what we know and feel all through the week, that God is with us, that God is for us, that God will not abandon us, that we are not in this life alone. God through Christ and by the power of His spirit gives us the ability to live new lives, to be fully alive as God intended. Yet in churches all across this land people come to worship half dead.

I know you've heard the story about someone who actually passed away in the middle of the church service, and the EMTs came, and it took them 20 minutes to find out which one.

We're not supposed to be here half dead! We are here because we are being made new and completely alive. Rejoice is not just a word for hymns. It should describe what you feel because of what God has done for you.

Way back in the second century, an early church father named Irenaeus put it this way. He said, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” The glory of God is humanity fully alive. Now 1,500 years later, the Westminster catechism put it this way, “Humanity's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” Yes, that is our main purpose. Glorifying God and enjoying Him forever, now that is one purpose, not two because it is in our joy in God that we glorify God. As Irenaeus said, “The glory of God is humanity fully alive.” To be fully alive, we need to be connected to God and to a believing community.

Please, if I forget myself in a moment and sing, and the sound operator forgets to turn off my microphone, do not tell me how badly I sing. I know. I know. I've been told in every church and many times here and by radio listeners all across Greenwood. I'm going to sing anyway and you should, too. Sing because you feel like it. Sing because you know God and have joy in His love, forgiveness, and grace. Sing because you are free to glorify God by loving Him with your whole life and free by His power to love your neighbor and even forgive and love yourself, even forgive and love yourself. You can rejoice right here, right now. Let me hear you sing as we stand and sing together our closing hymn, #365, “Grace Greater Than Our Sin.”