

Jeremiah 31:31-34

April 3, 2022

Ephesians 2:4-10; Psalm 122:1 or Psalm 27:3-6

Matt. 16:13-18, Rev. 21:1-4

Choose Church

Magnify Jesus

Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” His disciples answered saying John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. But Jesus insisted, just as He insists to us today, “Really now, who do you – not others – who do you say I am?” Remember Peter’s answer? “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Then Jesus made one of the most profound of announcements: “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,* Matt. 16:13-18.

The church is a group of individuals united under Peter’s declaration: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Not come to by human thinking, but revealed to us by our heavenly Father. The church’s one foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord. The how, who, and where of a church varies around the globe, but the reason the church exists never changes. The church exists to proclaim Jesus, the Savior, who died on the cross to save us from sin, and rose from death that we too might rise with Him. *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his,* Romans 6:5.

This message is as timely and true today as it was when the apostles testified to Him. Our purpose is to magnify Jesus - make Him greater in our lives – just as we aimed for in our Lenten study the “Being Challenge.” Easter is two weeks away. Can we genuinely, deeply, proclaim Him the Savior, the Son of the living God? Are you honestly making Him greater in your life? Take an honest look.

Nothing magnifies Jesus so much as when people grow in relationship to Him. Are you growing in relationship to Him? Nothing glorifies God more than bringing someone to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Who are you bringing to Easter worship, April 17, so they can see and hear that He is the Messiah?

Our Savior stands as a beacon of hope to each and every individual, for God so loved the world that He didn’t stand far off and lament, or form a committee, but gave His one and only Son, to save us from sin. [Do you know this to be true in your heart of hearts? Do you know this to be so valuable that it must be shared with others?] Here at FUMC we don’t count anyone’s national origin, ethnic background, or the color of their skin. That makes no difference! It’s the color of a person’s heart that makes all the difference in the world! Because of Christ Jesus, the darkness of sin that lurks in every human heart is made light. We’re here because we together, have and yearn for a heart the color of Jesus.

***Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,* 1 Peter 1:3. Jesus’ resurrection means that He has power now to convey His life to you and me. Easter is God’s victory over all the brokenness and death that everyone faces! Who will you invite to join you in His victory?**

No matter where you get your news, there's a lot of negative stories. The church is where the greatest news of all time is consistently broadcast. *But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*, Rom. 5:8. [see also Colossians 2:13-15.] Choosing church puts you in the place where you hear the Good News of Jesus. Choosing church puts you right where you can hear of God's faithfulness in the past, God's power in the present, and God's hope for our future. We need to hear this message – I say weekly – to counter all the negative we hear in the world.

This is the last of our Lenten messages focusing on the 5 Keystone habits of Jesus, which we want to put into practice so that we can become more like Jesus. This week the habit is Choose Church. We don't practice these habits to prove we deserve God's love or for the admiration of people. We practice them because we already have God's love, and He has deemed us worthy. And when we fail to live by these habits, His grace encourages us to come back and try again.

Spiritual But Not Religious

You may have met people who say "I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious." Many people don't see any reason to come to church. These days many say they can have a good relationship with God without church. A recent poll of young adults showed that 90% of those ages 20-29 agreed that they can have a good relationship with God without going to church; 88% of those age 30-39 said the same.¹

Some have been burned by church involvement and too often Christians have shown good reason to be called hypocrites. Trust God fully and trust Christians wisely. Churches are filled with people who hurt one another. But churches are also filled with people who help one another.

Many who have been bereaved by the loss of a loved one, many who've suffered a terrible illness or injury, many who've experience great emotional trauma, have found hope in the promises of Scripture, support and comfort through the hugs, acts of kindness and compassion, and being with others to worship and sing together the praise of our Heavenly Father. Going to church doesn't instantly solve your problems and heal your hurts. But it helps ... helps a lot.

Churches are certainly not filled with perfect people and the more you are in church the more you bump into other people. But staying focused on Jesus, pursuing Him in our lives, we'll be able to forgive one another and see firsthand how God's power is made perfect in our weaknesses. Our church is really more like a hospital for sinners than a museum for saints. In the power of the Holy Spirit, we are wounded healers, helping one another realize the great healing from sin we have in Jesus Christ. St. Paul's words can be ours too: *That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong*, 2 Cor. 12:10.

There is research showing that regular church goers are happier than non-attenders. Having a sense that the world is infused with meaning and purpose, that God does care for you and your family, makes it possible to deal more successfully with life's inevitable trials and tragedies. Isn't this a truth we want our children to have? Bringing them to church consistently puts them in a place to hear that message – a

message they won't get elsewhere. The great abolitionist, former slave, and advisor to Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglas, once said, "It's easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." The number one indicator of whether children (both boys and girls) will attend church is, if Dad does.

Always Forward

The author of our Lenten study, Zach Zehnder tells that his great-grandfather, also a pastor, is remembered for his favorite slogan: "Immer Fort!" That's German for "Always Forward!" In the O.T. in the book of 1 Samuel, chapters 13 & 14, it reports of God's people, the Israelites, and their battles with the Philistines. Here's what it says: *The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Mikdash, east of Beth Aven. When the Israelites saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear, 1 Samuel 13:5-7.* Did you get that? The Philistine army was so large and powerful that the Israelites melted away in fear, hiding in caves and thickets, or crossed eastward over the Jordan River.

To make matters worse the Israelites had been effectively disarmed, as it says: *Not a blacksmith could be found in the whole land of Israel, because the Philistines had said, "Otherwise the Hebrews will make swords or spears!" ... So, on the day of the battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand; only Saul and his son Jonathan had them, 1 Sam. 13:19&22.*

Outnumbered and disarmed, things didn't look good for the Israelites. God had promised them victory, but it sure didn't look like victory was in the cards. Then Jonathan (the king's son), without telling his father, took the initiative.

Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, *"Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised men. Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the LORD from saving, whether by many or by few," 1 Sam. 14:6.* And so, the two of them sneaked up on the Philistines and attacked, putting fear into their camp. *Then panic struck the whole army—those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties—and the ground shook. It was a panic sent by God, 1 Sam. 14:15.* Let's hear what happened then...

... Then Saul and all his men assembled and went to the battle. They found the Philistines in total confusion, striking each other with their swords. Those Hebrews who had previously been with the Philistines and had gone up with them to their camp went over to the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan. When all the Israelites who had hidden in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were on the run, they joined the battle in hot pursuit. So, on that day the LORD saved Israel, and the battle moved on beyond Beth Aven, 1 Sam. 14:20-23.

I have this little sign in my office that reads: "I'd rather run with two than drag twenty." It took only two – Jonathan and his young armor-bearer – to step out in faith, trusting in the Lord, to bring a great victory to Israel! It started with two, then God shook the earth, and the king and his men joined the battle, then those who had been

the naysayers, came back, and finally those who'd run away in fear, came back and joined the victory. So, what's the point of this ancient story?

I believe that the Lord is still leading His people to victories. A church never retires. There's no point for a congregation to "save" for retirement. They either continue to do all they can to magnify Jesus and follow Him into the future, or they lose heart and sit around waiting to die. Stepping out in faith is often frightening, because we don't know where it'll take us. Just as often it looks like the odds are stacked against us. Nevertheless, *Perhaps the LORD will act in our behalf...* 1 Sam. 14:6.

We can be the last in the crowd to join in or we can be like Jonathan and his armor-bearer who stepped into God's promises and see Him work miracles. The thing is, God is always working on a bigger story, His story. Assuredly, God wins in the end and those who are on His team share the victory. That's why my favorite slogan is: "I'm on the winning team." God is going to do what He wills to do ... whether we join Him or not. If not, He will find others to extend His kingdom. Nevertheless, He invites you and me to be in His story right now. It doesn't matter if you feel unworthy or ill-equipped. That's how I feel too! We feel that way because it's true, we are unworthy and ill-equipped. But let's remember, Jesus went up against the most powerful of all enemies, the devil, who has the most powerful weapon, sin, and its fear-inducing result, death, and Jesus conquered all. By conquering through His death and resurrection, He gives us the chance, through His grace, to play a part in God's great story. It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman, black, white, or brown, young or old, rich or poor. God says, "I love you with an everlasting love. I've erased your sins and I choose you for my team." We were unqualified by our sins, but He qualified us by His grace. We were ill-equipped and weak, but He gave us the power of the Holy Spirit. Ours was a self-focused story, but He brought us into the greatest story of all time.

Ours is to take steps of faith ... stepping where God has already promised to be ... to fulfill His great purpose to bring all people into His family. ["From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast, through gates of pearl streams in the countless host, singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: Alleluia, alleluia!"]

The church is full of flaws, but if you want to make a difference and step into His story, knowing that God is at work, choose church.

Always forward, on the winning team, until Jesus returns!

¹ Stetzer, Ed, et al. *Lost and Found*, B&H Pub. Grp., 2014; as quoted in Zehnder, Zach, *Being Challenge*, Red Letter Living LLC, 2020; 236.