

- It is great to be back.
- Yvonne and I were able to spend last week visiting with family, which is always great.
- The week before that, we were able to attend General Council in Columbus, Ohio. This is a week long national conference where people from Alliance churches all over the United States gather for worship, to be challenged, to learn through workshops, to be encouraged and to hear God's heart. It was refreshing to our souls.
- We were able to meet with missionaries, other pastors, and be inspired.
- There was something that God impressed on me and I am going to touch on it morning. The teaching series on the Holy Spirit we will begin the week after the picnic.
- In the hustle, bustle and busyness of life and church, it is easy to neglect, to forget, to drift away, from matters of first importance.
- **WE MUST REMAIN TRUE TO MATTERS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE.**
- Almost everyone has applied for a job and most of us have been on a job interview, even if it was some time ago.
- Some people love the process, others hate it. Some are so intimidated with the process they avoid change at all. I've have a variety of interviews in my life, but the time I had the most was coming out of college. I had interviews with around 10 different companies, and some were pretty straightforward. One hour – done.
- Others were very intensive – I remember going through 4 sets of interviews. They asked hard questions, situational questions. Passed the first one and whittled it down and then met with more senior people. Passed that one, then they went with higher ups and they brought us to their offices. Finally we had the last interview and two candidates were offered jobs.
- They were thorough. It was impressive. Then I declined the job. It wasn't for me.
- The interview is as much about seeing whether or not the job is one you want as it is about whether you are right for it. Every job carries with it a description – sometimes very detailed, sometimes just in the boss's head, but there are expectations of what is required if you take the job.
- So let me ask you . . . what would the job description be for a Christ-follower?
- When you decided (or if you have yet to decide) to be a Christ-follower, what is required?
- Some might think it involves living a moral life. Follow the ten commandments. Love people. Be nice to my neighbors. Go to church. Get rid of all addictions. Watch only G-rated movies. Read the bible every day. Prayer at least once a day, preferably twice (not including meals).
- Perhaps it would be about our world. Take care of the environment. Recycle. Be nice to animals. Take care of nature. Help fix problems in nature. Be involved in town and state initiatives to watch over this world.
- Maybe it's about helping people. Be patient, kind and peaceful. Dig wells in Africa. Help the orphans and widows. Serve those who are down and out. Feed the homeless and hungry. Build homes for those who have none.
- Maybe it's all those things?
- There are good things. The bible talks about many of them. These or some variation should characterize our lives. Yet I am left wondering if we sometimes spend so much time on so many things that we forget to **REMAIN TRUE TO MATTERS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE.**

- Since we are followers of Jesus, it might be good to see what he said about following him.
- I want to look at the first words Jesus said when he invited people to follow him. I want to look what he said about his own mission. I want to look at the last thing he said to those who followed him.
- Jesus spent roughly the first 30 years of his life growing up and being prepared for his ministry. When he did begin, he began to preach. He called people to repent because God's kingdom was coming. He started healing people. As he did, he asked God to lead him to those whom he could pour his life into.
- We don't have the words he used with all of the 12 that he chose, but all of the writers of the gospels record his invitation to the first ones. Luke gives the most detail. If you remember the story, Jesus told Peter, Andrew, James and John to go out fishing even though they had fished all night and caught nothing.
- They did and caught a large catch of fish – a financial windfall that was so miraculous they were amazed and overwhelmed.

*Luke 5:8 When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, 10 and so were James and John, the sons of Zebedee, Simon's partners.*

- They were not just amazed at their good fortune – Jesus miracle made them aware of their own sinfulness compared to his power and holiness.
- Then Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." 11 So they pulled their boats up on shore, left everything and followed him.*

- Jesus laid out his call in a wonderful picture. "Your lives were dedicated to catching fish. To putting all your energy into getting fish, cleaning fish, selling fish, making a living catching fish. I am calling you to a live dedicated to catching people."
- Follow me. This is what I will show you.
- Note what he did NOT call them to. He did not call them to live better, more moral lives. To learn their bibles better. To join a ministry.
- Follow me. I will show you how to catch people.
- Jesus spent the next couple of years doing exactly that. In fact, in another great story that you are probably familiar with, Jesus gave an overview of the entire purpose of his life. The disciples had been with him for a while, and he was teaching how to live differently, healing and helping people, gaining followers, and he passed through Jericho. He saw a man named Zacchaeus, a tax collector, who was interested in seeing him. Jesus ended up going to his house with Zacchaeus and all his friends for dinner.

*Luke 19:7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."*

- Jesus, this is not appropriate. This is what a good person does not do. They had a view of the job description.

*8 But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." 9 Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.*

- Then, in case they had missed it, in case they hadn't grasped the purpose of all that he was doing, he made a statement about his entire life.
- 10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*
- The entire reason that I, the God of the universe, took on human form, to live among you, and ultimately to die was because I want to find and save lost people. I am here to draw people into a relationship with God.
  - This is repeated in many different ways.

*Matthew 20:28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

*John 12:47 If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world.*

- Even after all this, the disciples were a little slow to get it. After he was raised from the dead he met with his disciples a number of times. When the time for him to leave for good came, he gathered his followers around them for his last words. The most important words.

*Acts 1:6 Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"*

- They thought it was now time to rise up and bring Israel to prominence, to throw off Rome. The disciples still had it wrong. That is not what this has all been about.

- So to be totally clear, Jesus gave them, and all who follow him, a commission.

*7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. 8 But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

- Here is your job. To let the Holy Spirit empower you to be my witnesses everywhere. To tell people me. Who am I. What I did. How they can move into relationship with me and find freedom. To be saved. It is so important, it is a job that must go out starting at home and to the ends of the world.

- Let me tell you this – if we are not engaged in reaching those who don't know Jesus, then we have missed the point of His life.

- **WE MUST REMAIN TRUE TO MATTERS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE.**

- If my life, if our church, leaves behind a trail of good services, wonderful programs and retreats, bible studies and classes, good works and helping those in need, but we have not pointed people towards a Savior who is seeking them, then all our actions won't amount to much.

- If you think I am over-emphasizing the importance of this, listen to Jesus.

- *"I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."*

- Why? Because that is the heart of the Father. And it must be ours too.

## **I. Reach one more (Jerusalem).**

*"you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem"*

- When Jesus told them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, he meant those people that are closest to us. They are the ones right around us.
- For the disciples, these were the Jews who lived in their city. They were the people they knew, went to synagogue with, spent time with. Their people.
- You know the story – Jesus had told them to wait in Jerusalem – they did and then the Holy Spirit came on them, there were tongues of fire on their heads, they spoke in languages they did not previously know, and many people heard about Jesus and came to follow him.
- The church went from 120 to over 5000 very quickly.
- Jerusalem was rocking. Beggars were healed. Peter was imprisoned. Everyone knew what was going on.
- The initial shot of growth was from this amazing preaching, but all these people needed to be in relationships. The growth continued because people who went to work, lived in their neighborhoods, and went to school
- How are you doing at reaching those closest to you?
- Who is your one?

- I used to have no connections with those who did not know Jesus. The thought of being a witness raised all kinds of weird thoughts like giving tracts, inviting them to church things where they would be uncomfortable, having to rub shoulders with people I didn't want to.
- I would have objections like: I don't know any non Christ-followers, I wouldn't even know what to say, I'm more about those inside the church, I'm an introvert – I don't even really like people, I don't have time.
- Who's your one? Maybe there is more than one.
- This doesn't have to be complicated. I would encourage you to pray simply this every day. What's next? Then do what God tells you to.
- If you have no relationships, ask him what to do to find one.
- If you have a name, then ask him what's next with that person. Then do it.
- This is so powerful. [HAVE THEM SAY THE NAMES OUT LOUD TOGETHER]

## II. Get engaged in community. (Judea and Samaria)

- When Jesus said they were to be witnesses to those in Jerusalem and Samaria, he was referring to those close to you who are not like you. These are those not in your immediate circles.
- It was uncomfortable enough that God had to use persecution to get people to do this. The stoning of Stephen was the ultimate act that triggered intense persecution.
- The people scattered. We read over this too lightly.
- What would have to happen for you to pull up stakes, sell your house, gather your family, and go to another state?
- Philip went to Samaria. These people were hated. They were nothing like the Jews. It was considered the bad part of the country. Good Jews did not hang out with them. But through him the Holy Spirit came on them.
- He talked to an Ethiopian eunuch who he witnessed to in the chariot.
- Peter himself was led by God to Caesarea to the Gentiles – people he would not normally connect with.
- What might that look like for us?
- Disadvantaged people, immigrant, students, church planting, needs in South Jersey, Philadelphia, etc.
- I believe God wants us to be involved in church planting. Not sure whether it will be on our own, in partnership, or the end form, but we will be pursuing this as a church.
- Engage in community. We need each other for all of these challenges. Follow your passion. If you have no passion, attach yourself to someone else's passion.
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## III. Step up your generosity quotient (Ends of the earth)

- The remainder of the book of Acts is dedicated to how this went down.
- Followers of Jesus spread far and wide.
- Paul and others were commissioned to plant churches and they did so all over the world.
- They so believed in Jesus last words that they died far from home for the sake of Jesus.
- One of the most encouraging things that came out of the conference, was the news that God is doing amazing things around the world. We heard story after story.
- Children in Muslim country who in classroom wanted to know how to see the bright line again when teaching about Jesus.
- Country that is 100% Muslim with a growing church.
- God visiting people in dreams. Churches growing.

- Buying land in the middle of war torn countries in order to reach the disadvantaged (deaf) in their society. It left me with two thoughts.
  - Christ-followers are making great sacrifices and the kingdom of darkness is being driven back.
  - What is our response. For some, it means going. If God is tugging on your heart, if he is calling you towards missions, then explore it. Go on a short term missions trip. Train for full time work.
  - But most of us will not be so called. For us, we want to support those who are. In the Alliance, we do this through the GCF. Money given so that people who don't have an opportunity to know Jesus get that opportunity.
  - The money given to that has eternal value and will mean so much more than the stuff we so routinely buy. So step up your generosity.
  - Give – we want to grow as a church to give 10% of our income to GCF. Be engaged in reaching the most disadvantaged people. We could do so much more and the only barrier to a lot of it is money.
- **BE TRUE TO MATTERS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE.**
  - What's interesting as that Jesus commission is not an either/or statement.
  - It is a statement of "ands".
  - *"The church that does not evangelize will fossilize."* (Oswald J. Smith – pastor and recruiter of missionaries)
  - *"Any church that is not seriously involved in helping fulfill the Great Commission has forfeited its biblical right to exist."* (Oswald J. Smith – pastor and recruiter of missionaries)
  - *"The gospel is only good news if it gets there in time."* (Carl F.H. Henry – founder of Christianity Today)
  - *"Sympathy is no substitute for action."* (David Livingstone – missionary to Africa)
  - **BE TRUE TO MATTERS OF FIRST IMPORTANCE.**
  - The same Holy Spirit that appeared to and on the disciples and empowered them lives in me and empowers me. Do you believe that?
  - We cannot do any of this, make any difference, lead anyone to Jesus, without the empowering of the Holy Spirit.
  - That is why beginning the first Sunday in July, we are going to spend the summer examining the Holy Spirit. To begin to understand him better, and open ourselves to the power and freedom only he provides.
  - So ask the Spirit to help you reach one more. Get engaged in community with others. Step up your generosity quotient. Let's together live out the heart and mission of Jesus.