

Sermon: Stories, Our Story

“Our Story”

Luke 15:11-32

11 To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. 12 The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

13 “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. 14 About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. 15 He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. 16 The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

17 “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! 18 I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, 19 and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’

20 “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. 21 His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.[a]’

22 “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his

finger and sandals for his feet. 23 And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, 24 for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, 26 and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 27 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

28 "The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, 29 but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. 30 Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. 32 We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'"

I. Introduction

For the last several weeks we have been talking about the importance of stories. Each person here has a story that began even before you were born and which is still being written. These personal stories are important to us, particularly when we have a chance to tell them to other people. Our stories convey more than information about our lives; they also provide a picture of our character, our dreams, our relationships, and how we view ourselves. But no story is formed or told in isolation. Our individual stories intertwine in places, and where they intersect new stories develop. It is important for us to recall our individual and communal

stories, so that we can remember where we come from and dream about our future. But sometimes, we get so wrapped up in our own small stories, that we forget there is a much greater narrative that has been unfolding all around us that includes us all – the story of God and his kingdom.

During Jesus' earthly ministry, he gave the people around him glimpses of this bigger story, through the miracles that he worked and the challenging words that he spoke to them. And every now and then, he used parables to illustrate and explain these pieces of God's story that he was showing to them.

So far, we have heard Jesus speak about praying with perseverance to receive an answer from God. We have learned about the difference between paying lip service to God's commands and true faithfulness to them. And then we heard a series of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God; how to identify it around us, how it is spreading throughout the world, how valuable the kingdom really is, and how we can enter into the kingdom. Through these parables, Jesus has painted a picture of who God is, what his kingdom looks like, and how we can become citizens.

Today, we are going to finish this series by looking at the final piece of the puzzle. We know that we have our own stories as individuals and as a group, and we know the story of God and his kingdom. But where do our stories fit within His? What part do we play in God's bigger narrative? What character represents us in the tale?

II. Lost Things

At the beginning of Luke 15, we find that Jesus has been doing the unthinkable. He has been visiting, teaching, and even eating with sinners. And he has been doing so publicly. This is something no self-respecting Rabbi would do, and the Pharisees were worried it was making them all look bad. They

considered this just one more reason that Jesus was a threat. You see, they had somehow forgotten that faithfulness to God required more of them than avoidance of sin. They were called to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God” so that they might enjoy God’s blessings and become a light to the nations. But somewhere along the way the religious leaders had traded justice, mercy, and humility had been traded for power, self-centeredness, and pride. In doing so, they also forgot the call of God to seek out those who were far apart from God, and point them toward him. Known sinners were considered second-class citizens. They were unclean, which made them untouchable.

Jesus had already told them that he hadn’t come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance (Luke 5:32). But they still didn’t seem to get it. Those people who were broken and far away from God were the very ones these religious leaders were supposed to love. But they had forgotten the heart of the Law in their pursuit of outward adherence to it. So, Jesus once again sat down to tell a series of parables describing the worth of one who is lost.

He spoke first of a shepherd who, upon learning that one of his sheep was lost, left the entire flock to go searching for it in the wilderness. And when he found it, he carried it home and then called together all his friends to celebrate that he had found his lost sheep. And then he talked about a woman who had ten coins, then lost one of them. When she discovered its absence, she searched high and low, not stopping in her pursuit until she found the lost coin. Then she called her neighbors to tell them the good news, so that they could celebrate with her.

If the people listening to Jesus could imagine the urgent desperation of a lost sheep or coin, and if they could envision the joy of finding what was lost, why couldn’t they picture what it must be like for God, when one of his lost children is found and brought home to him? But they couldn’t

see it. They couldn't get past their prejudice, and they couldn't remember what it was like to be alone in the wilderness. They couldn't picture themselves as last things, and they couldn't picture those who were lost as valuable and worthy of pursuit. So, Jesus told them a third parable; this one about a father and his sons.

[Read Luke 15:11-16]

1. The second (younger) son.

The first character we learn about in this story is the younger son. He is impetuous and impatient, ready to leave his father's house and experience all the excitement he believes life on the outside can offer. So, he approaches his father and demands his inheritance. His father consents, and he takes what is given, leaves home, and then squanders it all seeking worldly pleasures, without responsibility.

Before long his money runs out, and so do his options. He is in a foreign land and a famine has hit, making it even harder to find food. Though he is able to find work with a farmer, his desperation is made clear when we read that he was taking care of pigs, which were unclean animals, and dreaming of eating the food he was giving to them, because nobody was offering him anything to eat. He was totally neglected, destitute, and without hope. He has run away from the protection of his father's home, has turned away from everything he has been taught to do, and has gotten himself into a terrible situation that he doesn't have the ability to overcome on his own.

Have you ever felt completely stuck? Have your circumstances ever gotten so bad that you couldn't see a way out? Have you ever been exhausted with how things are and hungry for something to change, but didn't know how to make that happen? How did it make you feel? Were you scared? Were you heartsick? Have you ever just looked around you and declared that you are

done, that you just can't take it anymore? If you have ever experienced a season of hopelessness, you are not alone.

The Bible tells us that we have all been stuck like this at some point. And that feeling of being stuck began with our first parents. So, it should come as no surprise to us that the second son represents each one of us here this morning, at some point in our lives. Even those of us who were born and raised in the church have been guilty of taking liberties with God's promises and have squandered them through disobedient living. The Bible says that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's standards of holiness; we have all been disobedient at one time or another. Through our disobedience we damaged our relationship with God to the extent that we became slaves to sin and were unable to please God on our own. In other words, because we are sinners, we have all gotten ourselves into a situation that we have no power to overcome on our own. We need help. We need a Savior. But sometimes we don't see our need until our situation is so dire that we have exhausted every other option; until we are starving and alone, like the second son, some of can't admit the seriousness of our situation.

Fortunately, God offers each of us an opportunity to see our reality for what it is. He enables us to catch glimpses of our dilemma through his prevenient grace, and he prompts us to look toward him for our help. In the parable, Jesus said that the second son "came to his senses".

[Read Luke 15:17-19]

In other words, the second son became aware of how bad his situation was and recognized that he couldn't fix it. Even more profoundly, he realized that he had a father at home who loved him and who even took good care of his hired servants, so that they didn't have any needs. But it is one thing to have an epiphany, a moment of clarity, and another thing entirely to act on it. His remembrance of his father's

kindness and his recognition of his own disobedience would have meant nothing, if he had simply allowed them to pass without acting. But the story says that he did act, by deciding to seek out his father and repent of his sins.

Just like the second son, we each have an opportunity to not only recognize our perilous situation, but to do something about it. The Bible says that when we confess our sins to God, he is faithful to forgive us and cleanse us from all wickedness (1 John 1:9), and if we openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (Romans 10:9). Repentance is confession and belief. These are action words. And while it's true that we can't do anything to earn our salvation, and like the second son are incapable of fixing the mess we are in, we are invited to respond to God's offer of free grace, through acceptance, confession, and belief.

Now, the second son had made up his mind to do something about his situation. He had a plan, and had decided to act on it. Up to this point, we might assume that this lost or prodigal son is the main character in the story. Don't we often think of ourselves that way, too? How often do we view the things around us as though we are the central character? How often do we form opinions, make judgments, or take actions with self-interest as our primary motivation? But we quickly learn in the next section that this story, like the entire Bible, is really less about humanity than it is about God, who in this case is represented by the father.

[Read Luke 15:20-24]

2. The Father (the main character).

We learn three things about the father from this passage. **First, Jesus said that while the son was still far away, his father saw him coming.** If you have ever felt like you have walked too far away from God to ever find your way back to

him, then verse 20 is for you. The reason the father in this story was able to see his son coming from far off is because he was still there waiting and looking for his return. The father had never lost hope that his son would return to him, and he was actively scanning the horizon in hopes that he would catch a glimpse of his beloved. In the same way, the whole Bible tells the story of our Heavenly Father, who has laid out the welcome mat for his children and who continually scans the horizon, waiting for our return to his household. He will never grow weary of searching for us, and he will never lose hope that we will return to him. Every moment that you have spent wandering in the wilderness apart from God, he has spent preparing a welcome for your return.

The second thing we learn from this passage is that the Father forgives completely. When he saw his son in the distance, the father didn't start grumbling to himself about all ways he had been a disappointment. He didn't start making a list of wrongs to toss in his son's face. He didn't start planning retribution. What did he do? Jesus said that he threw off all his inhibitions and ran – he didn't walk, he ran – to embrace his son and kiss his face. It didn't matter to him what had happened before, it didn't matter that his son had squandered his inheritance, it didn't matter that he had lived a reckless life. All that mattered was that his son was home again, safe and sound, and the father couldn't wait to hold him in his arms.

The son came prepared to repent of his sins and ask for a place as a servant in his father's house. But after confessing what he had done and proclaiming his unworthiness to be called a son, the father interrupted him by telling his servants to cloth him like a prince and to call together the entire family to celebrate his return. The son was hoping to find a place as a servant in his father's house, but the father's response was to welcome him as his child.

Friends, this is exactly how our Heavenly Father responds to

us, when we turn to him in faith, through Jesus blood. It doesn't matter what we have done, what inheritance we have squandered, what life we have led; when we turn to him in confession and faith, he welcomes us into his household as a child of the King. He clothes us in righteousness, and gives us a new share in his inheritance, along with a place in his kingdom today and every day. This is the great God we serve. And this is why we give him all glory and honor and praise. Once we were lost, but now we are found, through faith in his son Jesus. All our sins are forgotten. They have been left on the cross, and we have been given new life in the Spirit. Amen!

The third thing we learn about the Father, is that he loves to party. Now, there are plenty of people in the world who find this hard to believe. In fact, I'd say we have largely forgotten this *inside* the church, too. Because when I look around at most Christians, the last thing I think is "there goes a person that loves to party". Nevertheless, the Bible uses a lot of party analogies to talk about God's response to one of his children coming home. And this parable is no different. The father immediately tells his servants to prepare a feast, so the family can celebrate his son's safe return.

Have you ever thought about salvation that way before? Have you ever looked at your own life and thought you were worth celebrating? The Bible says that all the angels in heaven rejoice, when even one sinner comes to repentance. That means each one of us is worth so much to God that he wants to celebrate when we return to him.

You may be going through a tough time in your life right now, and you may not be in the party mood. But when your Father in Heaven looks down on you, he sees someone who is valuable and loveable and wonderfully made in his own image. You may be smudged, you may be wounded, and you might be lost. But in the midst of all our brokenness, he has reached down from heaven

through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to pull us back from the brink and bring us home again. When you come to him through faith in Jesus, he clothes you with robes of righteousness, he forgets your sins, and he celebrates you as his beloved child. God is throwing parties in heaven, with all the angels, every time one of his little ones crosses over from death to life, through repentance and faith in his Son.

Which brings us to the final character in this parable of the lost son.

[Read Luke 15:25-32]

3. The first (oldest) son.

This passage tells the story of the first son. He is the oldest, the most responsible, the one who has lived by his father's rules and been a productive member of the household. And when he finds out that his father has thrown a big party for his troublemaking brother, it makes him angry. He doesn't understand how his father can be so quick to forgive. I mean, he doesn't even see the second son as his brother; his father has to remind him that they are from the same family. He can't find it in his heart to forget what his brother has done, and so he doesn't want to join the party. His brother's return isn't good news to him, and he isn't willing to celebrate his return.

The first son represented Pharisees in Jesus' telling of the story, and now he also represents the church. He was the first child to receive his father's promised inheritance, just as Israel was the first to receive God's promises in the Old Testament, and now the church is recipient of all God's promises through Jesus and the Spirit. The first son has been loyal to his father's commands, but he has become filled with spiritual pride, because of his position in the family, and he is lacking in grace and forgiveness.

The Pharisees refused to have anything to do with those who

were obvious sinners. They put on a show of having it all together and obeying the letter of the Law, while on the inside they were wasting away from spiritual pride and neglect. They had forgotten God's call to be a people of the light, who reach into dark places to point people toward God. They were quick to hand out judgment and slow to forgive. We, in the church, are often guilty of being like the Pharisees. We so easily forget our own sins and bury them deep beneath a veneer of obedient living in public, while they secretly eat away at us from the inside in private. We forget that we are called to live as witness in the world, not as strangers apart from it. And when lost children finally make their way home to become our brothers and sisters, through Christ's blood, we treat them with contempt. We refuse to celebrate, and because we refuse to celebrate, we refuse to participate in the work of reconciliation that God is working in the world to bring lost sinners back to himself.

When we act like the first son, we accept our own place in the Father's house with pride, but secretly begrudge the adoption of our sisters and brothers.

III. Application

I asked earlier, which character in this parable most represents who we are in God's story? We have all been like the second son, at some point. But who do you identify with today?

Maybe you still identify more with the younger son. Even if you have repented of your sins and asked Jesus become Lord in your life, and even if you have been welcomed into the family of God and clothed in white robes of new birth, you might still, at times, feel like a wandering child, stuck in circumstances that are out of your control.

Terrible situations aren't just reserved for those who are

living apart from God. Christians, experience all kinds of difficulty in life. We deal with all of the same pressures and difficult decisions and life disasters as everyone else. And sometimes, our situations can lead us to despair, even when we know we have a Father in Heaven who loves us, just as the second son in Jesus' parable knew he had a father at home, who loved him.

Maybe you find yourself struggling to understand your current circumstances, or maybe you don't see a clear way forward. Maybe you are struggling to live into your role as a child of the King. Maybe you just feel stuck. If this is you, then there is only one way to get unstuck, and that's to turn to your Father who loves you, repent of your disobedience, and ask him to send his Spirit of adoption on you in fresh and powerful ways, through Jesus Christ. Only he can lead you up out of your despair and give you reason to celebrate.

Maybe you identify more with the oldest son. Maybe you have gotten so comfortable in your position as a child of God that you have forgotten what it is like to be on the outside. Maybe your own joy at being saved has turned into spiritual pride and you have lost compassion for those who are hurting.

The best way to find out if this is you is to search your own heart. Do you look for ways to partner with God to reach the lost, or are you too busy pointing a finger at our culture to offer a helping hand? Do you get excited when someone new comes to faith in Jesus, or do you find yourself whispering about the sins they are still learning to throw aside as they grow? Are you friends with anyone who isn't a professing Christian? It's hard to have compassion for people we never see. Do you truly want to see the Church of Jesus Christ grow, or would you rather keep things the way they are?

If you identify more with the first son, maybe it's time to ask God to give you a heart that is broken for the lost. Maybe its time to stop enjoying your privilege as a member of God's

household, and start living as a loving child of the King. Maybe you need to join in the celebration for those who go from lost to found.

IV. Inspiration

Whichever character you identify with this morning, and whatever burdens you carried with you into this place, our Heavenly Father is inviting you to turn it over to him today. He is scanning the horizon, looking for you to return to him and confess your attempts to do everything on your own. He is waiting to greet you with open arms, to cloth you with his own peace and righteousness, and to welcome you home.

God welcomes all sinners into his presence, through faith in Jesus. What would it look like if more of us resembled the Father in our response to those who have strayed from him? What would it look like if we trusted him enough to turn over every aspect of our lives to his control, and then take our place in his household, not as prideful heirs, but as grateful daughters and sons?

V. Closing Prayer

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have loved us so much that, even when we strayed from you, you never stopped searching for us. Rather, you sent your Son Jesus into the world to provide a way for us to return back to you. We thank you for welcoming us as your own children, through faith in Jesus, his death and resurrection. And we ask you to cloth us with your righteousness, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Would you show us how to become children who don't take your grace for granted and develop spiritual pride, but who remember your great mercy, and extend it to others as forgiveness? We love you Father! And we ask all these things

in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sermon: Stories, Dinner Time

“Dinner Time”

Matthew 22:1-14

22 Jesus also told them other parables. He said, 2 “The Kingdom of Heaven can be illustrated by the story of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. 3 When the banquet was ready, he sent his servants to notify those who were invited. But they all refused to come!

4 “So he sent other servants to tell them, ‘The feast has been prepared. The bulls and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the banquet!’ 5 But the guests he had invited ignored them and went their own way, one to his farm, another to his business. 6 Others seized his messengers and insulted them and killed them.

7 “The king was furious, and he sent out his army to destroy the murderers and burn their town. 8 And he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, and the guests I invited aren’t worthy of the honor. 9 Now go out to the street corners and invite everyone you see.’ 10 So the servants brought in everyone they could find, good and bad alike, and the banquet hall was filled with guests.

11 “But when the king came in to meet the guests, he noticed a man who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes for a wedding. 12 ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you are here without

wedding clothes?’ But the man had no reply. 13 Then the king said to his aides, ‘Bind his hands and feet and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’

14 “For many are called, but few are chosen.”

I. Introduction

It was the early 90s, and I was a sophomore or junior in high school. I was heavily involved in the music programs of the school. I played trumpet in the concert and jazz bands, and baritone in the marching band. I started out singing with the concert choir, and was asked to join a smaller group called the Chamber Singers that sang some more difficult arrangements. I also played football, briefly, and had been involved in soccer for years prior to entering high school. So, even by my sophomore or junior year I was pretty used to competition. I knew that I had to practice, if I wanted to hone my skills and abilities. I knew that I had to show up to class and extra-curricular meetings if I wanted to stay part of the group. And I knew that, when the big game or concert day arrived, I had to show up prepared mentally and physically, if I wanted to do my best.

So there was absolutely no excuse for what happened that day. I had been to countless concerts already, and knew exactly what I needed to bring with me on the road. Our school choirs were heading to the state competition, which was a big deal for us. We packed up our gear, loaded the buses, and headed out of town. I have always had a tendency to wait until the very last minute to pack, though. Sarah can tell you I still typically pack in the fifteen or so minutes before we leave on a trip, unless I am going overseas. And this day was no exception. I had quickly thrown all my clothes into a garment bag, zipped it up, and rushed out the door in a hurry. I

didn't take time to double-check and make sure that I had everything I needed.

When we arrived at the competition, our teachers sent the guys to go get dressed. I was joking around with my friends, not paying much attention as I put on my tuxedo, until I got near the end of the process. I had my jacket and pants, my belt, my cummerbund, and my tie. I even remembered a white undershirt, which is something, considering I forgot that even on my wedding day. I looked in the mirror to make sure my tie was straight and my hair was perfectly spiked down the part (this was the 90's folks), and then reached for my socks and shoes. And that's when I realized that I should have taken more time to pack.

In all the hustle and bustle and procrastination, I had forgotten to pack a pair of black socks. All I had were my very white tube socks I had worn on the bus. Now, this might not ordinarily be a problem. But I had two things going against me that are peculiar to choir competitions. One, my tuxedo was a cheap, untailored, generic-sized uniform intended for long use by as many students as possible. It fit me, but only sort-of. The legs were a little short and exposed my socks. This wouldn't be a big deal, I suppose, since we sing in a big group and sort of blend together. Except that, secondly, choirs in competition stand on risers on a stage, which effectively places our legs and feet at eye level, and we made something of a show out of walking on and off those risers.

I knew I was in trouble. There was no way I could hide my mistake. I asked every guy in the choir if they had an extra pair of socks. But let's face it; this was a bunch of teenagers. We were lucky someone hadn't forgotten their pants. Nobody brought extra anything. I didn't have a choice other than to either wear my white tube socks, with a black tux, or go without them. I can still remember how embarrassed I was to walk on stage, with my white ankles advertising to the crowd

that I was not prepared. I hadn't dressed properly for the occasion. And, as a result, I stuck out like a sore thumb.

II. We all show up unprepared, from time to time

Your experiences might not be as humiliating as my own (and believe me, this is just one of many), but I would venture to guess that most of us here have – at one time or another – shown up to something unprepared. Maybe you didn't study for the big test, or you were out of shape for the athletic competition, or you were either under or overdressed for the occasion. Whatever it is, I'm guessing you have experienced that uncomfortable feeling of knowing that you are out of place, and it's because you neglected to prepare properly. Sometimes being unprepared is just really awkward. But other times it can have a serious penalty. For example, my short time in the military taught me that showing up unprepared for an inspection or muster can have disastrous consequences for the unprepared person and their entire platoon.

For the last few weeks, we have been taking a look at some of Jesus' parables; stories that he used to illustrate what he was teaching his followers. In several of the parables we haven't covered, Jesus spoke about the importance of being prepared, particularly about the coming judgment. But he also talked about being prepared as it relates to the kingdom of God.

III. How can we enter the kingdom of God?

So far, we have seen that Jesus used a number of parables to describe the reality of the kingdom. He told his disciples what signs to look for, so they could identify the kingdom, even as they wait for it to fully arrive. He told them how the kingdom is slowly permeating every part of the world, in every

time and place, until there will be nothing left that isn't touched by it. And then he used parables to describe how valuable the kingdom is; so valuable, in fact, that it is worth trading everything we have to obtain. So, we know that the kingdom has come, but not yet fully, and is spreading throughout the world. We know the signs to look for, so we can recognize God's kingdom activity. And we recognize that the kingdom is of the very highest value, worth giving up everything else to pursue. This leaves us with one final question: **How do we enter this kingdom?** Jesus answered this unasked question with another parable in Matthew 22.

[Read Matthew 22:1-14]

On the surface, this story illustrates the history of the nation of Israel. The king represents God the Father, who called Israel out of Egypt and named them as his chosen people. They were set apart from the other nations and intended to be a light to the world that demonstrated the goodness and greatness of God. They were given a special place in the Father's household, and even though they were unfaithful over and over again, God fulfilled his promise to them that a savior would come from the house of David.

God had been preparing them for Jesus for centuries, through the prophets. He had been foreshadowing the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. He had given them all the markers they would need to identify the Messiah when he came. But, just like the people in Jesus' parable, they still weren't prepared to receive an invitation to become citizens of the kingdom. God's people rejected and abused the prophets, even killing some of them, like John the Baptist. They became distracted by material wealth and earthly success, and they failed to heed God's call to celebrate his Son, when he arrived among them.

Friends, how often has the church fallen into the same trap as the nation of Israel? How often have we allowed ourselves to

become distracted by the pressures and desires of this life? How often have we abused those who carry the message of the gospel that demands us to fully love God and others, through surrender of self? How often have we failed to accept God's invitation to join him in his kingdom work? How often have we failed to recognize the King's Son and honor him in our daily lives?

As I read this parable and consider all that Israel missed about God's activity, even though it was right in front of them, I wonder what we might have missed from him, too, in our complacency. And I wonder if we shouldn't be more concerned than we are about the consequences for being unprepared to receive his invitation. As the parable continued Jesus said that the people's mistreatment of his servants and unwillingness to accept his invitation to the feast angered the king so much that he sent out his army to destroy those murderers and burn their towns. Their unfaithfulness was rewarded with disaster, because they did not recognize and honor the king's servants or his son.

But there is a second half to the story.

Because the king's chosen people did not receive his invitation with joy, he commanded his servants to go out into the streets and invite everyone they found – good or bad, righteous or unrighteous – to come to the feast. Here is where the story took shape beneath the surface. The unasked question was how does one enter the kingdom of God? Jesus' answer was to say that all have been invited, but only those who come prepared will be allowed to remain. Let's talk a bit more about those two ideas.

- 1. First, God has issued an open invitation to the kingdom.** In theology, we call this *universal atonement*. When Jesus willingly died on the cross, even though he was innocent, he took the penalty for our sin upon himself and turned away God's wrath. In doing so, he not only

removed the guilt of our sin, but also overcame it's power over us. When we place our trust in him we receive God's forgiveness for our disobedience and our relationship with him changes. The Bible says that we become adopted daughters and sons of God and heirs to all of his promises, which include the kingdom. Atonement literally means to make us *at one* with God, through Jesus' death and resurrection. When we say that the atonement is *universal*, we simply mean that Christ's sacrifice was made for all humanity. There is no one who stands outside of God's love; he willingly offers his grace and forgiveness to *everyone* who will receive them by faith in Jesus. It is an invitation to the whole world to enter into the kingdom and become God's children. You don't have to come from a certain family; you don't have to have special credentials. There is nothing you or I can do to earn God's invitation. It is freely given to everyone.

Now that the open invitation has been extended, though, we have to make a choice about how we will respond. We can either reject the invitation, or accept it. But if we accept it, we must come prepared for the occasion, as Jesus' parable indicates.

- 2. In other words, we must come properly dressed.** In the story, the king saw a man who was not wearing clothes that were appropriate for a wedding banquet, and because he was not prepared the king threw him out. It is one thing to accept God's invitation to the kingdom and come to the gates, but in order to enter those gates we must be properly clothed. But what does that mean?

Revelation 22:14 says, "*Blessed are those who wash their robes. They will be permitted to enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life. (NLT)*" The proper attire for entering the kingdom is a white robe, which symbolizes holiness. But these robes didn't start out white;

we saw earlier in Revelation 7:14 that they were made white by washing them in the blood of the Lamb.

Christ's atonement was universal, and God's invitation to the kingdom has been made to all people, but there is only one way to enter the kingdom gates, and that is by trusting in Jesus alone for our salvation. When we repent of our sins and follow him by faith, he removes our guilt and clothes us with righteousness. There is no other way to enter the kingdom of God.

IV. Application (You)

So, what does that mean for us here today? Friends, we are here to proclaim the good news that God has issued an open invitation to the kingdom, through the blood of his only Son, Jesus. There is nothing you or I can do to earn this. It doesn't matter if we have been in church every Sunday, since birth. It doesn't matter if we have read the Bible cover to cover and done everything in our power to obey what it says. It doesn't matter if our parents or siblings or friends are good Christian people. It doesn't matter if we know all the right answers in Sunday School or can sing all 300 verses of *Just As I Am*. None of that matters, if we don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. If you have never personally asked him to forgive you for your sins and come into your life to take his rightful place as your King, then you will always be standing on the outside of his kingdom gates.

So many people have heard and responded to God's invitation, but have only done so half-heartedly. They come to church and sit in the pews, they go through all the motions that will show they are good Christians, because it is advantageous to do so, but they have never been clothed with the righteousness that only comes from a personal relationship with Jesus. And

because they have only responded to God half-heartedly, when it is no longer advantageous to appear Christian, they leave the church in droves. We are seeing evidence of this now through statistics showing significant changes to the number of people who claim Christianity as their religion in America. Jesus talked about this with his parable of the wheat and tares, where he said there will be those among the church who are not truly a part of God's people. Though they appear to be kingdom citizens, they are really only standing at its gates, awaiting the judgment that will see them cast out and separated from God's people and his kingdom for eternity. **Don't make the mistake of having all the appearance of being a Christian, when the thing that counts is actually *knowing* Christ.**

I realize that many, if not most, of us here have, at some point, asked Jesus to come into our lives and make us clean. We have professed him as Lord and trusted him alone to save us from sin and death. And by God's grace, through faith in Jesus, we have been reborn into the family of God as citizens of his kingdom. I know that I have. I confessed Jesus as Lord when I was five years old at The Federated Church in East Springfield, PA, during a service where we heard from missionaries about the work they were doing in Africa; much like what we just heard this morning.

But since inviting Jesus to come in and make us clean, some people here have been sort of hanging out by the gates of the kingdom. You've never taken steps further in, and you've never grown in spiritual maturity. You might be technically inside the kingdom's walls, but just barely. Maybe you feel like a fraud, or you just don't know where to go from here. Maybe you are still struggling with temptation or sin, and you just don't understand why you haven't broken free from its grip yet. If this is you, I'm here to tell you this morning that God has promised you so much more than a life of just getting by. He has promised you a full and abundant life, in Jesus.

And to prove it, he has given us the Holy Spirit to all who believe. He dwells in you, and if you turn your worries and temptations and feelings of inadequacy over to him, he will take those burdens and transform them into joy. He will take your weakness, and give you his strength to overcome anything you face.

Some of you need to surrender your concerns to God this morning and ask the Spirit to walk you hand-in-hand away from the kingdom gates and toward the throne of the King. Some of you need to take a leap of faith and trust God to lead you out of temptation and sin, and help you produce a harvest of righteousness in your life. Some of you just need to ask God to help you take the next baby step in your journey of faith.

As long as we are heading in the right direction, with the Spirit as our guide, we will always be found prepared and in the proper attire for fellowship with the King. But if we hang out at the gate too long, we may eventually find that we are heading in the wrong direction, entirely.

Jesus concluded his parable by saying the man who was found without the proper wedding attire was thrown out into the darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Consider this: what good does a freshly washed, white robe do us, if we just go and get it all dirty again? We may enter the gate of the kingdom through Jesus and his blood. But we maintain a right relationship with God, and kingdom citizenship, through obedience that leads to holiness. True faith will always produce spiritual fruit in our lives. We all fall short, at times, of God's desires for us, and we know that he forgives us, even when he rebukes us. But willfully continuing in sinful behavior, once forgiven, makes a mockery of Christ's sacrifice and declares to God that our allegiance lies elsewhere. Continue in this pattern for too long, and he may cast you out of the kingdom as one who is no longer dressed appropriately for dinner with the King.

Friends, God is still sending out his servants, the Church, with an open invitation to all people to join in the wedding feast of his Son. The invitation is there to accept, but please do so whole-heartedly. Don't waste your life standing at the gates, when he has promised you an abundant life in Jesus. Pursue him as your first priority, so that you won't be found unprepared and underdressed, when you meet him face-to-face.

V. Closing Prayer

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have loved us so much that you sent your Son, Jesus to die – not just for a few – but for all people. We thank you that the invitation to enter your kingdom through him is freely offered to all of us; we only need to respond in faith. For those who haven't yet been cleansed by faith, we ask your mercy. And for those who are hanging out by the gates, afraid or unwilling to take steps forward, we ask for your Spirit to come in power. Set us free for joyful obedience, and make us into the transformed people you desire, so that we might become your servants who carry your invitation faithfully and passionately to the world around us. We ask all of this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sermon: Stories, Buried Treasure

“Stories: Buried Treasure”

I. Introduction

Have you ever wanted something so badly that it became an obsession? Has anything ever captured your attention so much that it was continually in your thoughts, and you couldn't let it go until you had it?

I remember as a kid having a small obsession with the cartoon Voltron. It is a show about heroes from space, who operated giant robots that looked like lions. They would battle against evil forces to protect their home, and when things got too tough for them as individuals, they would band together and their lions would join together to become a huge robot warrior, with a giant sword. The first time I watched that show, I thought it was the coolest thing I had ever seen. So, I began watching it every Saturday without fail, and dream of what it would be like to drive one of the robots.

It wasn't long before commercials started advertising toys to go with the show, and when I discovered I could buy all five separate lions and join them together to make the warrior, I just knew I had to have them. And the more I thought about it, the more obsessed I became with them. The only problem was that my parents said no to buying it. We weren't anywhere near Christmas or my birthday, which comes in early January, and it was too expensive to just buy on a whim. My only option, then, was to use my hard saved allowance of \$1 a week to buy these toys the next time we were at a toy store.

Finally, the day came to visit Toys 'R Us. My parents asked me if I was sure I wanted to spend so much of my money on this one thing, and I assured them I did. So, I emptied my Crayola Crayon bank, took it to the store and spent every dime to satisfy my obsession. At the time, I couldn't think of anything else that had more value to me than Voltron. And though I later experienced buyers' remorse, at the moment of

purchase I was willing to spend everything I had worked to save to get it.

II. We all make value judgments

We each make value judgments on a daily basis. We all place higher value on certain things in our lives, even to the extent that we are willing to sacrifice to attain those things. But, how do we know if they are the right things, or even good things? If we are paying attention at all to the world around us, we can easily see that people have placed incredible value on all sorts of questionable things.

Some people are willing to trade everything for success. We might define success in any number of ways, but most people today equate success with economic achievement. We have talked before about how our society treats “busy-ness” as a virtue. This is particularly true if our constant activity brings us financial gain or a leg-up in business. We praise those who work long hours and often spending weeks away from family to increase their business ventures around the world. We applaud those who can successfully navigate the cutthroat politics of Wall Street and make the difficult decisions necessary to survive in a global market and come out on top. We invest in companies that show success in minimizing costs and improving profits, even when those come at the cost of employee families through layoffs or stressful work conditions. And we admire those who retire to mansions, because they have achieved the American dream, even though it may have cost them family, true friendships, peace of mind, or spiritual and physical health. Some people are willing to sacrifice anything to succeed in life, according to the world’s standards. Most of us, though, are just willing to give up most things for a more modest sort of success.

Some people are willing to trade everything for a high – a

feeling of momentary excitement. When the promise of success seems too fleeting, or too difficult to attain, or when the troubles of life start to take their toll, many people in our society turn to whatever will give them a temporary feeling of being larger-than-life. How else can we explain the fact that we still have a drug and alcohol abuse epidemic in our country, even when we know about the dangers, and even among the most financially secure populations?

But drugs and alcohol aren't the only high that people seek out on a regular basis. Millions of men and women gamble their life savings away every day in the hopes of striking it rich in the lottery, at the casino, or in online gambling. Even when the chances of winning are so low, many are willing to risk their family's present needs and future hopes for the intense thrill they get just before they scratch off those cards, see that final numbered ball, or lay down their hand of cards. It makes them feel alive for a moment, and that feeling is worth any risk. People turn to these things for a momentary escape from a reality that is less than appealing.

Others turn to the pursuit of unhealthy relationships and sex for that feeling of escape from reality and a sense of belonging. The desire to be loved by other people is so compelling that many people sacrifice their families, their careers, and their self-worth for the tiniest sliver of intimacy they think they will receive from a one-night-stand or an affair. And when maintaining real relationships becomes too much work, people retreat into the dark recesses of the Internet to seek out easier gratification without commitment, through pornography. Sexual purity is viewed as a repressive idea, both inside and outside the church, and even kids in our country are addicted to porn and engaged in risky sexual behavior.

Even more people are willing to trade everything for a different sort of escape, through entertainment. A couple of years ago Hollywood put out a funny little movie called *Warm*

Bodies that didn't receive much press, probably because it is a zombie love story. The idea is ludicrous, of course, but Sarah and I took a chance and went to see it when it opened around Valentine's Day. It is a wonderfully clever social commentary, and I have long considered writing a series of blog posts about the theology inherent in the film. One of the highlights comes near the beginning, when the main character, who is himself a zombie, delivers a monologue about how wonderful it must have been in the days before the apocalypse, when people were still people, rather than mindless shuffling creatures and were able to have lively interactions with one another. As the voiceover continues, the camera dissolves into a past scene at the airport, where hundred of people sat next to one another or passed each other in the concourse; all of them with their heads bowed low over their mobile phones, most of them with headphones blocking out the world, and none of them engaged in conversation. The image was funny, but also frighteningly real. We don't need an apocalypse to turn us all into zombies; our iPhones have already done that.

Now, there are people who will argue and say that nobody is willing to sacrifice truly important things for entertainment. I've got two concrete examples that will challenge that assumption, one for the kids and one for the adults: Minecraft and NFL Football. You already know what I mean, don't you? Some of the kids in our church (mine included) will make all sorts of crazy trades to get just five more minutes on Minecraft. And some of the adults in this room would literally throw someone else under a bus, if it got them a pair of Colts tickets. The average family in America trades all sorts of possible valuable pursuits to spend their evenings on a couch absorbed in television shows, focused on phones or tablets, or playing games on a console.

I confess that I have really struggled with this myself. I grew up in the beginnings of the video game generation and became a teenager during the earliest days of the Internet,

and found both to be exciting and easy distractions from the difficulties of life. It is no joke to say that I was addicted to games for a number of years before God broke their hold on me, and I still wrestle with maintaining a healthy balance in the time I spend off and online. The desire to escape into an imaginary world is a huge temptation that can lead to a wasted life. And while some entertainment is a good and healthy thing, we need to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that few of us consume our diversions in a balanced way. It is simply too easy, in an always-connected world, to elevate our own entertainment to the highest-level priority. The truth is that people will go to almost any lengths, in order to be entertained.

Some people are willing to trade everything for a sense of security and a life without risks. We sometimes call these people prudent, because their lives appear to be filled with restraint and self-control. But more often the lives of those who seek security as their highest priority are filled the regret of past loss and a fear of the future. We often see this expressed as excessive worry or attempts to control every detail of life and legislate the behavior of other people. It manifests as a tendency to avoid contact with the outside world and seek safety with those who look and act just like us. A desire for security is one of the biggest hindrances to the spread of the Gospel, and yet many churches are mired in their immovable desire to preserve what they have, rather than risk any loss.

We could go on and on, but I think the point has been made clear: people are often willing to give up absolutely everything for whatever it is they consider to be the highest priority. Christians are no different from other people in this. So the questions we must ask, as followers of Jesus, are these: What do we value most? What are we willing to trade anything to get? What will we protect at all costs? If you aren't sure of the answers for yourself, consider for a moment

what things you spend your free time doing. What activities are you willing to sacrifice time with your family to pursue? What things consume your thoughts or even keep you up at night with worry? What things have you blocked off in your schedule as immovable? What things are you willing to miss church for? These things are your priorities. And I'll bet some of these priorities are so important to you, that you would be willing to trade almost anything for them.

III. Jesus said some things are worth sacrificing anything to attain

You might be surprised to hear that the Bible doesn't condemn the idea that some things are worth sacrificing anything to attain. Some priorities are actually worth pursuing at any cost. But, the scriptures do challenge us to reconsider what things are truly worth the sacrifice.

Last week we discussed two of Jesus' parables about the kingdom of God found in the first part of Matthew 13. Jesus used stories about a mustard seed and yeast to illustrate to his disciples how they could identify the kingdom and the manner by which it spreads. We defined the kingdom as God's sovereign and redemptive activity in the world. It can't be found in a specific location. It is visible wherever God makes his presence known; particularly in lives transformed through an encounter with Jesus that leads to forgiven people, who pursue holiness and pour out the sacrificial love of God on other people. The kingdom has come already, but not yet fully, and we are living in an age of expectation as we wait for Christ to return. Like a mustard seed, the kingdom of God starts small in the hearts of people, and then grows into a flowering tree that gives life to all that encounter it. And, like yeast, the kingdom of God is steadily working its way into every time and every place. It pushes back against the darkness, wherever that darkness is found, and will continue

to do so until God completes the good work that he has begun and judges to humanity.

But it doesn't do us any good to be able to identify the kingdom or understand how it spreads, if we don't also understand its true worth. How does it benefit us to know these things, if we don't value the kingdom of God enough to pursue it as a prize? Continuing on, in Matthew 13:44-46, Jesus began to paint a picture of just how valuable the kingdom really is.

44 "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field.

45 "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. 46 When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!

These parables tell us two more important things about the kingdom of God that Christians everywhere need to take to heart in order to get our priorities straight and follow Jesus faithfully.

1. First, the kingdom is something to be sought after.

In both of these parables, Jesus described the main subject as actively looking for something. How do we know this? He *discovers* the hidden treasure in the first, and *discovers* the pearl in the second. Any scientist or adventurer can tell you that discoveries don't just *happen* to people; they aren't passive events. Rather, people make discoveries when they are in motion. While they are often made in unexpected places, discoveries are always made when someone is seeking something, whether it's knowledge, a solution to a problem, a new territory, or a specific goal.

Likewise, the riches of the kingdom of God are only discoverable when we are actively looking for them. We might find its treasures in unlikely places, but we will never find it at all if we aren't looking to begin with. Unfortunately, the church is filled with more passive Christians than explorers; more spectators than athletes. We are too easily contented with those initial glimpses of the kingdom that we may have found when we met Jesus and sit back to wait for more to come to us, and as a consequence we miss out on the full riches he offers to those who actively pursue him as their top priority. Like the people in these parables, Jesus is calling each of us to actively pursue the kingdom, as though we are running toward a prize.

2. The second thing these parables tell us is that the kingdom is so valuable, that it is worth any price.

In the first story, Jesus referred to the kingdom as a treasure; in the second, he said it was like a priceless pearl. The value of a thing depends entirely upon what someone will pay for it. If you aren't willing to pay much for something, then it is of little value to you. But, if you are willing to pay a fortune for something, then it holds tremendous value for you. Both of the men in these stories sold everything they had in order to purchase what they had discovered. They held nothing back in reserve, because nothing else could equal the value of what they had found. Jesus said this is the view we should have of the kingdom. It is so valuable that, when we discover its riches, we should be willing to trade everything else we have in order to obtain it.

Before we move on, we need to clarify what this means. We need to make a distinction here between salvation and the kingdom. God has *freely* offered all people forgiveness for their sin, through faith in Jesus Christ, his death, and his

resurrection. There is nothing you or I can ever give to purchase this gift for ourselves. It is the free gift of God to all who believe. Jesus is the only one who could pay the price, and he has already done so on our behalf. But freedom from the guilt of sin is just the beginning of the riches of the kingdom. It is the seed from which the tree grows and branches out. **The fullness of God's kingdom isn't just forgiveness of sins; it is new life in Christ.** And for the joy of knowing Christ fully, we must be willing to sacrifice anything. God's forgiveness is a free gift of grace; but in order to know Christ fully and experience all the blessings of the kingdom, we must be willing to sacrifice everything, including our lives.

Talking about all of the things that had been his highest priorities in life the Apostle Paul said it like this, in Philippians 3:7-11:

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead! (NLT)"

We should consider all other things worthless, compared to the joy of knowing Christ as Lord. Jesus has made perfectly clear that the kingdom of God, which can only be experienced through him, is the single thing worth sacrificing everything else to pursue. Nothing else commands this price – not family, not success, not happiness, not security, nor any other thing in

this life. Only God will satisfy the desires of our hearts, and only when we live as citizens of his kingdom will we ever experience the fulfillment of God's promises.

IV. Application

If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that most of us get our priorities out of order on occasion. Even worse, many of us regularly treat other things as more important than seeking after Jesus and his kingdom promises. We often substitute lesser things of temporary consequence for greater things of eternal value. Friends, God is not satisfied with playing second chair in our lives. He isn't interested in riding in the passenger's seat.

But how do we change the way we have done things in the past? What does it mean to *actively* seek the kingdom? And what does it really mean to say that we are willing to pay any price?

Actively seeking the kingdom means making Jesus our highest priority. If we really believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and if we truly want to follow him as Lord, then he must become our first priority, not just some of the time, all the time. He must become greater; we must become less. This means spending regular time with him in prayer, asking him to guide our steps and order our days. It means showing up regularly to worship Jesus with the community of faith as a celebration for all that he has done, and to seek out his desires for us together. It means turning our backs to things that try to pull our attention away from living obediently to God's commands. It means throwing out the destructive habits of our sinful past, and embracing his new life for the future. Friends, making Jesus our highest priority means saying "yes" to him every day, and saying "no" to everything else that tries to get in the way. But if Jesus is going to be our first priority that necessarily means everything else has to come

second.

In Matthew 6:33, Jesus told his disciples to “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness” and God would take care of all their needs. He will take care of our families, our finances, our work, our desires, and all of those other things that occupy our thoughts. If we put Jesus first, we can trust God to provide for us, just like a father provides for his children.

Finally, being willing to pay any price for the kingdom means handing over everything to God, in complete surrender. When we sacrifice everything to pursue something other than the kingdom, we might eventually get what we desire. But once we have it, we will find that it cannot satisfy. We will always want something more. Not so, if we give everything to gain the kingdom.

We each struggle with holding onto control of something in our lives. For some of us it's our work, for some relationships, for others our finances, and for many our families, specifically our children. We hold onto control over things, when we fear their loss. But fear is a product of the kingdom of darkness. The kingdom of God drives out fear wherever they meet. And the price of God's kingdom is total surrender to Jesus as Lord and King. That thing you fear losing? Jesus says to cast that burden on him. His yoke is easy; his burden is light (Matt. 11:29). And *his* kingdom is eternal.

What would it look like for us to treat the kingdom of God as though it is the most valuable thing in our lives? What would it take for us to become willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it?

God isn't calling most of us to literally give up everything we have to follow him today, but he *is* calling us to become prepared to do so. There may come a day when that very thing is asked of us, and we won't be ready if we don't prepare our

hearts for it now. I believe what God wants from us today is a re-ordering of priorities. There is freedom to be gained, when we give up control of our lives to Jesus. And there is a great storehouse of treasures to be found, when we seek first the kingdom of God. What are you prepared to surrender to Jesus this morning to obtain its true riches?

V. Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have loved us so much that you have promised us a place in your kingdom and an inheritance in your household, through Jesus' blood. We thank you that, in our greatest our of need, you sent your Son to die on a cross for our sin and freed us from guilt and death. Father, we ask now that you would help us to become a people who seek your kingdom and union with Christ above all other things. Would you help us to make these our first priority, surrendering all other things to you. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Sermon: Stories, A Little Goes a Long Way

“A Little Goes a Long Way”
Matthew 13:31-33

Parable of the Mustard Seed

31 Here is another illustration Jesus used: “The Kingdom of

Heaven is like a mustard seed planted in a field. 32 It is the smallest of all seeds, but it becomes the largest of garden plants; it grows into a tree, and birds come and make nests in its branches.”

Parable of the Yeast

33 Jesus also used this illustration: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman used in making bread. Even though she put only a little yeast in three measures of flour, it permeated every part of the dough.”

I. Introduction

Sarah can tell you that I know my way around the kitchen pretty well. I like to eat well, so I learned to cook at an early age. When I began working in business, I found that cooking was a stress reliever for me. I enjoyed making new things, and there was something calming for me about the task of cutting vegetables at the end of a long day. I learned how to use spices in a way that doesn't require precise measuring, but which blends flavors. I figured out some shortcuts for getting things done more quickly in the kitchen. Over time, my enthusiasm for cooking has waned a bit, but I still enjoy the ability to whip up new recipes from ingredients on-hand, or make special meals for family on their birthdays or special occasions. I have also been able to use the kitchen skills I picked up over the years to serve in the church. The last year we lived in Kentucky I served as a cook for our church's weekly meal ministry to the poor, where we routinely prepared meals for between 200 and 400 individuals each Saturday. All this is to say that the ability to cook has served me pretty well over the years, and I am glad I picked it up, even though I don't do it as often these days.

Unlike cooking, though, I never really developed any ability for baking. Maybe it's because baking requires such precision,

or maybe it's because I don't typically eat many sweets or bread. Whatever the reason, I have just never had a whole lot of success when it comes to baking cookies, cakes, or bread from scratch.

If you are wondering what in the world the point of all this is, let me cut to the chase. When I am good at something, I am more willing to spend time working on it. Since I had an affinity for cooking, I was willing to devote time to improving my skills. But, when it comes to baking, I have tended to take shortcuts or rely on other people. This has made me lazy, when it comes to baking, and laziness almost always backfires at some point.

When Sarah had only been married a couple of years, she had a brief period of time where she had some pretty strict dietary restrictions. One of the biggest challenges was that she couldn't eat anything with iodine in it, so anything made with regular table salt (also called iodized salt) was off the menu, including pretty much all breads. I ultimately wound up borrowing a bread maker to make homemade bread for her during that short period, but before putting in the extra effort out of love for my wife I tried the lazy man's approach. I went to the store, bought some frozen bread dough that didn't have iodine in it, and planned to toss it in the oven and bake it that evening.

The only problem with my plan occurred when I unloaded the car and didn't notice that the roll of frozen dough had slipped out of the grocery bag, and wedged itself under my driver's seat. I'm sure you can see where this is going now. It was summer, which means it was hot outside, and I left that dough under the car seat all afternoon and evening. And the next day, when I opened the car door, I was greeted with the overwhelmingly sour smell of yeast. And then it hit me. What did I do with the dough I bought yesterday?

When I looked in the backseat, the source of the smell was

easy to spot. Because of the heat, our car had acted like an oven. The dough had split its fragile container and swelled to easily six times its original size, and then had baked onto the metal underbelly of the car seat. That is that last time I bought frozen dough at the store.

I'll never forget the lesson learned that day about the power of a tiny bit of yeast to expand in incredible ways, when given the right environment. So when I read these parables of Jesus where he described the Kingdom of God as a tiny seed growing into a magnificent tree, or a small bit of yeast leavening a full measure of dough, I think about that roll of unbaked bread in our car. The underlying idea these analogies point to is that, once it takes a foothold in the world, God's Kingdom expands quickly and forcefully. What starts small in the hearts of people quickly grows into a towering tree, and when the kingdom touches the edges a life or community, it soon permeates the whole.

II. We all have trouble seeing the kingdom of God, sometimes

It's an inspiring notion, isn't it, this idea that the kingdom has come and is quickly taking over the world? Theologians refer to this as the in-breaking kingdom. This new reality that we live in, since the Incarnation, where the God's justice and mercy have come to earth, but not yet fully. But, if I'm really honest, there are a lot of days when I look around me and can't see the kingdom of God clearly, because the brokenness of the world is looming so large. Have you ever wondered why you don't see the kingdom of God in this or that situation? Does it bother you that we still see so much brokenness and evil in the world, when we know that Christ has already won the victory against darkness and sin? Or do you wonder why it is taking so long for Jesus to return and establish his kingdom forever? These are tough questions, and many of us struggle with them at times. The solution to these

things is patience – trusting that God is in control and will complete the work he has started, in his time. But let's be honest, most of us aren't very patient. So, well-meaning Christians have often come up with other ways to answer these questions.

One of the ways Christians have sometimes dealt with the waiting is to give apocalyptic predictions and warnings that speculate about the future. To many, Revelation has become a message of impending disaster, instead of a love letter from God to the church. It is filled with the hope of his promise to never leave us or forsake us, but instead to bring his justice on the earth and welcome the faithful into his new creation, but we often read it as a roadmap for the end of the world, filled with fear and foretelling of doom. This response to the reality of God's in-breaking kingdom focuses too much on the future kingdom, and in doing so distorts our view of the hope that we have in Christ, and ignores the activity of God in the present.

A second way that Christians have often responded to this period of waiting is to minimize reflections about our future hope and concentrate on the present activity of the Church. This view of the in-breaking kingdom says that the primary role of Christians is to transform culture here and now, because this *is* the New Creation. Our hope is in what we can do *now* through our freedom in Christ, not in some unforeseen eternity. But this view focuses too much on the present manifestation of the kingdom, and misses out on God's promised future, when all things will be made right and the faithful will live with him in glorified bodies for eternity in a new heaven and new earth.

The problem is the same with both of these extreme responses to the reality of God's in-breaking kingdom, and this period of waiting, when the kingdom has come already, but not yet fully. The problem, is that they both seek to find the kingdom "over there" somewhere, when Jesus has told us it is all

around us, pervading every time and place, and pointing us from this moment toward eternity. We all have trouble seeing the kingdom of God from time to time. But we too often look for it “over there”, when it has already broken in all around us.

III. What is the Kingdom, and How does it Spread?

We aren't alone in wondering about the kingdom of God, or why we sometimes find it so difficult to identify; the disciples wondered about these as well, and also struggled to understand the relationship of God's work in their present and his promises for the future. In Matthew 13, Jesus taught his disciples using a string of back-to-back parables. And all of these stories had one thing in common. In one way or another, they were all about the kingdom of God. It seems there was still plenty of confusion about what exactly Jesus was trying to accomplish. In the previous chapters, we learn about Jesus traveling the countryside, healing illnesses of every sort, and teaching along the way. But he was just healing ordinary illnesses. No, he was healing the things that were impossible to cure; things like leprosy, paralysis, and demon possession. And he wasn't just teaching the way that other rabbis were. He was challenging the religious leaders' interpretations of things central to their faith, like fasting, Sabbath keeping, and what it means to be a true disciple. Jesus had even sent out his disciples, giving them the power to do all these same things and instructions to share the good news of repentance and belief to the surrounding towns.

Word of Jesus' unusual behavior was starting to get around. He was upsetting the status quo, and beginning to make powerful people angry. He was even being accused of using the power of demons to accomplish his miracles. It should come as no surprise then that his family came to fetch him at the end of Matthew, chapter 12 and bring him back home before he got into

any more trouble. His actions were making them look bad, and they were concerned about what would happen if he continued on his chosen path. His response to their inquiries about him was to redefine what family looks like, saying those who do the will of God are his true mother, brothers, and sisters.

We often move past this section as though his seemingly impassive redefinition of family is all that matters, but I think there is more going on there. In fact, I get the sense that, although he didn't show much emotion at the time, Jesus was bothered by his family's visit. After all he had been doing and saying, they still didn't appear to understand. Even though Jesus had been demonstrating what the kingdom of God on earth looks like, the people around him couldn't quite seem to see it. This must have bothered him, because the very next passage, from chapter 13 says that Jesus left the home later that day and went to the lake to be alone.

When people saw him, they began to gather around him, waiting to hear another word from this perplexing teacher. And since they didn't seem to understand his actions or what he had been saying, he once again resorted to parables, to help explain this new reality that his followers were struggling to understand. In the middle of this teaching moment, Jesus told these two short stories about a mustard seed and some yeast. Now, there are a whole host of questions these two parables don't attempt to answer. But there are two things in particular that these stories should cause us to consider.

1) First, what do we mean when we say "the kingdom of God"?

The kingdom is not a location. You can't find it with a map. It isn't located "over there". The church has done a terrible job of conveying the reality of God's kingdom, because we have made it seem like the only goal of the Christian life is going to heaven. We haven't talked enough about the New Creation and resurrection. And we haven't talked enough about the kingdom of God having already come, with the ability to awaken new

life in its citizens and push back against the darkness. When we think of the kingdom in purely physical terms, as a place apart from this world, we risk missing out on what God is doing all around us.

Here is a better definition: The kingdom of God is God's sovereign and redemptive activity in the world, in all times and all places. Like any kingdom, it is the place where the King dwells. Right now, we glimpse this in pieces, but one day God's presence will overwhelm and remake the world. Then all things will life and work according to the will of our Father in Heaven.

Since the kingdom is the presence of God in our midst, it brings life and rest from the weariness of the world. Jesus described this with the image of the mustard tree, which provides a place for birds to nest in its branches. It may have small origins, like acts of love and mercy, but it eventually grows into something truly substantial, just as the small mustard seed eventually becomes a towering tree. Jesus had been demonstrating this to the people by healing diseases, casting out demons, and preaching a message of peace with God through repentance. And in Matthew 10, Jesus had told the crowds that there is rest for the weary, when they cast their burdens on him. The kingdom is life giving, because it resurrects what is dead in us, giving us new life in the Spirit, and it carries the hope and promise of eternal life with God, through Jesus' blood.

The kingdom is everywhere, because God is everywhere. But we can't always see it, because it is breaking in through God's redemptive work in the lives of ordinary people, which takes time and patience, and a long view of love and justice. But everywhere we see lives transformed by an encounter with Jesus and everywhere we see his love poured out through the Church, we are catching a glimpse of God's kingdom breaking in. Now, we see things darkly, as through a glass, but one day we will see clearly what God has been doing in our midst.

That is the kingdom. There is no perfect way to describe it, but if we ask God to give us his perspective, I believe we can see it for ourselves.

2) The second thing these parables lead us to consider is how the kingdom grows and spreads throughout the world.

Jesus used the nature of yeast to illustrate this point. Just like yeast, we must provide the proper environment for growth. But when we do, the kingdom has the power to expand in incredible ways. We aren't just talking growth in size, though. This isn't really an illustration about the kingdom growing bigger; rather, Jesus was indicating that the kingdom is steadily becoming pervasive. It permeates every part of life in every time and place that God's people stand as a witness to God's presence. We do this, first and foremost, by inviting the presence of the Spirit into our lives and churches, setting up outposts for kingdom expansion. Then we assist with the kingdom's expansion when we go out into the world to share with the world why the gospel is, in fact, good news.

IV. Application

Jesus shared these parables with his disciples to explain to them that the kingdom of God is something which starts small, but blossoms into a life-giving refuge for those who seek it, and that it spreads like yeast until it touches every part of our lives with God's grace. This helps us understand a bit more about what the kingdom looks like and how it spreads, but even armed with that information, we are still left with our initial questions. Why do we have difficulty identifying the kingdom around us? We know what to look for, so why don't we always see it?

1) First, I believe we miss the evidence of God's kingdom, because we are looking in the wrong place. I mentioned earlier

that there are two extremes at play among Christians: those that look only to the future, and those that look only to the present for answers. I believe we need to ask God to broaden our vision. We should ask him to remind us of our future hope purchased for us by Jesus, while remembering that the good news is also for the present. We are called to live fully as citizens of this kingdom, which has already come, but not yet fully. When we embrace the truth that God has called us to live as his children in the present world, we find opportunities to expand his kingdom to those who are living far apart from him. And when we place our hope in the promises of God, we can love sacrificially now, because we know that our future is bright.

2) The second reason we can't often see evidence of God's kingdom is because we haven't invited God to first establish his kingdom in us. In order for a seed to grow into a tree it must first be planted. And in order for yeast to spread throughout the dough, it has to be added to the mix. Until a person has received the forgiveness for sin that God offers us through Jesus, and begins trusting him as their Lord and Savior, they do not belong to the kingdom of God and will not see it's presence in the world. Until we invite the King to take his rightful place on the throne in our lives, we will always be standing just outside the kingdom gates, unaware of the riches contained within.

When we look for the evidence of God's kingdom both in our present situations and his promised future – not just “over there” somewhere – and when we have asked God to establish his kingdom in our hearts, I believe he gives us a new perspective. He allows us to see that anywhere acts of loving-kindness, self-sacrifice, mercy, justice, obedience, and worship in Jesus' name are happening, we are witnessing God's kingdom breaking steadily and forcefully into our world

I don't know about you, but with all of the crazy stuff going on in the world today, more than anything else I need to see

that God is still working to make things new. But we will never be able to discern how God is working in our community or our nation or our world, until we see people and situations the way God sees them. And that can't ever happen unless we invite Jesus to take complete control of our lives. Until we fully surrender to him and ask the Spirit to fill us with his presence, I think we will have a tendency to be more like the people who surrounded Jesus, observing his miracles and his teaching, but never recognizing the presence of God's kingdom in our midst.

Let's seek God together this morning in prayer, and ask him to show us his kingdom for what it is.

V. Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are so grateful that you sent your Son, Jesus, to die upon a cross for our sins. We thank you that, by receiving him as our Lord and Savior, we are set free from the power of sin and the fear of death. Father, would you help us to live as citizens of your kingdom. Would you help us to see all that you are doing around us in the world? Would you show us how we can participate in your kingdom work today, even while we wait for your promises for our future to be fulfilled. And would you show us, even now, those things in our lives that we have not yet submitted fully to you. We love you, Jesus! And it's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.

Sermon: Stories, Actions

Speak Louder

“Stories: Actions Speak Louder”

Matthew 21:28-44

Parable of the Two Sons

28 “But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, ‘Son, go out and work in the vineyard today.’
29 The son answered, ‘No, I won’t go,’ but later he changed his mind and went anyway. 30 Then the father told the other son, ‘You go,’ and he said, ‘Yes, sir, I will.’ But he didn’t go.

31 “Which of the two obeyed his father?”

They replied, “The first.”

Then Jesus explained his meaning: “I tell you the truth, corrupt tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the Kingdom of God before you do. 32 For John the Baptist came and showed you the right way to live, but you didn’t believe him, while tax collectors and prostitutes did. And even when you saw this happening, you refused to believe him and repent of your sins.

Parable of the Evil Farmers

33 “Now listen to another story. A certain landowner planted a vineyard, built a wall around it, dug a pit for pressing out the grape juice, and built a lookout tower. Then he leased the vineyard to tenant farmers and moved to another country. 34 At the time of the grape harvest, he sent his servants to collect his share of the crop. 35 But the farmers grabbed his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. 36 So the landowner sent a larger group of his servants to collect for

him, but the results were the same.

37 "Finally, the owner sent his son, thinking, 'Surely they will respect my son.'

38 "But when the tenant farmers saw his son coming, they said to one another, 'Here comes the heir to this estate. Come on, let's kill him and get the estate for ourselves!' 39 So they grabbed him, dragged him out of the vineyard, and murdered him.

40 "When the owner of the vineyard returns," Jesus asked, "what do you think he will do to those farmers?"

41 The religious leaders replied, "He will put the wicked men to a horrible death and lease the vineyard to others who will give him his share of the crop after each harvest."

42 Then Jesus asked them, "Didn't you ever read this in the Scriptures?"

'The stone that the builders rejected
has now become the cornerstone.
This is the Lord's doing,
and it is wonderful to see.'

43 I tell you, the Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation that will produce the proper fruit. 44 Anyone who stumbles over that stone will be broken to pieces, and it will crush anyone it falls on."

I. Introduction

Sarah and I met in college, when we were both very young (she was 18 and I was 21). As I think I've mentioned before, I had been working for an astrophysicist (that's a rocket scientist) writing software to control the hardware systems we used to conduct research on objects in space. That all sounds really

impressive, I'm sure. After I had been there a little less than a year, we hired Sarah to work as assistant to the professor in charge and to write grant proposals. We became quick friends, and both share a storehouse of funny stories we could tell about our coworkers there. They were an interesting bunch.

I sort of fell into my role there, when the professor, who also taught physics, discovered I had written programs for my graphing calculator to automatically solve all of the advanced equations we were learning in class. Not only did he allow me to use those programs on my tests, ensuring that I got a great grade, but he also offered me a job. And during my time there, he continued to challenge me with unusual problems to solve, and entrusted me with responsibilities that would ultimately influence the outcomes of many research projects.

Just having the opportunity to work on such creative pursuits and get paid for it was thanks enough. But one year, our boss surprised us with an incredible gift to express his thanks for our work. He submitted mine and Sarah's names to the National Science Foundation for an award that recognizes the contributions of students to science. That spring, we each received the NSF Student Fellowship Award, which is something I will always treasure.

But there was one slight problem with the award process. You see, our boss told us that there was a special dinner coming up to which we were invited. He asked each of us to attend, made sure we were aware of the dress code, and then even reminded us about it later. But he didn't tell us that the whole purpose of the dinner was to give us the awards. I told him that I would be there, thinking it was just a regular dinner—and then I promptly forgot about it.

The day of the awards dinner came and went, and I never once thought about it. Needless to say, my boss wasn't too pleased when I didn't show. He had wanted to bless me with something

special, but I hadn't followed through on my commitment to be present that day, and as a consequence, neither one of us enjoyed the event in the way that he had intended.

II. We are all guilty of paying lip service to our commitments

My guess is that all of us have at one time or another made a commitment to something and then failed to follow through on it. It may have been an unintentional oversight—maybe we were overly committed and simply forgot—or it may have been intentional, and we had no intention of following through from the beginning. Accidentally failing to follow through on most commitments will have little long-term effect on our lives, though there certainly are exceptions. The fact of the matter is that our society is so busy, that it is common for people to miss things. Other than a brief sense of mild annoyance, most of us probably don't get too concerned when someone else doesn't show up, and we expect others to forgive us quickly when the fault is ours—at least when we have a good excuse.

But committing to something and then intentionally choosing not to follow through can have more significant consequences, particularly from a spiritual standpoint. At the very least, it calls our integrity into question. We are told in the Bible that we should let our yes be yes and let our no be know. We are to neither swear by things that we had no hand in creating, nor should we work to explain our every answer. And Christians, above all others, should keep their word, so far as it is in our power to do so. We may fear the repercussions of saying no to someone, but any outcome we are likely to face is far better than breaching our own integrity.

When we knowingly agree to something, but have no intention of following through, it is called "paying lip service" to that commitment. When we become comfortable with paying lip service to things that are seemingly inconsequential, it becomes

easier to do so with things of eternal significance as well. If we continue to willingly dabble in attitudes and behaviors that are contrary to God's best for us, they have a way of dragging us on into deeper levels of disobedience.

In truth, we are all guilty of paying lip service to the demands of the gospel, at times. We do this when we declare on Sunday morning that we are followers of Jesus, but stop short of full commitment and obedience on Monday through Saturday, or when the path God is leading us down becomes uncomfortable or violates our personal preferences. We do this when we claim that Jesus is Lord in our lives, but then refuse to give him control over our decisions and actions. We do this when we put on the outward trappings of faithfulness, but don't allow God to transform our hearts.

III. Actions speak louder than words

At the beginning of Matthew 21, we read about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and find out that he encountered a lot of people with a half-hearted commitment to following God. We learn from the Gospel of John that Jesus had been performing many public miracles, and the people were starting to believe that he could be the promised Messiah. This made the religious leaders nervous, because they couldn't control Jesus and he was challenging their authority with the people. When he raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, before returning to Jerusalem, it sealed the deal for many of the people who had been watching him. He must be God's chosen one, they thought. So, it is no surprise that the people welcomed him to the city like a king. But we find out later that the crowds were paying lip service to any commitment to Jesus, and they all deserted him, when he was arrested later in the week.

Next, Jesus went into the Temple courts and drove out the vendors and money changers who were taking advantage of people

who had come there to offer sacrifices as the Law demanded. They had taken something central to the worship of holy God, and turned it into a means for gaining profit. After clearing the Temple, Jesus began to perform many miracles in the sight of all the people there. But the religious leaders were more concerned with the children shouting praise to his name than they were with the manifest presence of God's power. It seems that, even in the Temple, people were claiming to follow God, without letting him transform their hearts.

Later that evening, Jesus and his disciples went to Bethany where they were staying for the night, and when they returned to Jerusalem the next morning, Jesus spotted a fig tree and went over to it to see if it had any fruit that he could eat. This is one of the few times when we see Jesus' frustration with Israel bubble to the surface, and you can tell that he was still thinking about the events of the previous day. When he found that the fig tree was empty, he cursed it and caused its branches to wither. When asked about it he talked to the disciples about the power of faithful prayer to produce any result, but the deeper meaning behind this passage compares the fig tree to the religious leaders at the Temple. Neither bore fruit, so both were doomed to wither and die.

As if to drive the point home, when Jesus returned to the Temple to teach that day, he was confronted once again by the religious leaders, who had heard his words and witnessed his miracles over and over again. Though they claimed to be followers of God, devoted to his commandments, they could not see him clearly standing there before him. So, they questioned Jesus, asking him by what authority he was saying and doing all these things. But, instead of answering their questions directly, Jesus told them two interconnected parables.

Parable 1 – Actions speak louder than words [Read Matthew 21:28-32]

This first parable talks about what it means to pay lip service to our commitment to God. But before we talk about, there is something important we should note. Jesus wasn't directing this story at people in general; it was intended for God's people specifically. He talked about the relationship between a father and his sons, which is a relationship reserved for those who belong to God. This relationship belongs to all those who have been adopted as daughters and sons of God through faith in Jesus. So, although Jesus was directing this parable at the religious leaders of his day, it now properly applies to those of us who profess Jesus as our Lord and Savior. In other words, his words are directed at the church. And that is important for us to understand going forward.

In the story, the farmer's oldest son is at first disobedient. When his father said to go and work in the fields, he simply refused, choosing to follow his own desires. But before the day was out he had a change of heart, and chose to become obedient to his father's commands. He went into the field and worked as he had been instructed. The first son represents those who were once living far apart from God's kingdom, but who had allowed the good news to transform them into followers of Jesus. They rejected God at the beginning, choosing to live in sin, but when they encountered John the Baptist (and then Jesus) they received their words as true and began walking in obedience.

The second son in the story had all the appearance of an obedient son on the surface. When his father came to him and instructed him to work in the fields, he immediately committed to doing his father's will. But he was only paying lip service to that commitment. Though he appeared to be obedient, he never actually did what his father commanded. This second son represented the chief priests and Pharisees, who had all the outward trappings of faithfulness, but whose hearts were hardened. They spoke often of doing God's will, enforcing it

on others and condemning those who strayed, but inside they were wasting away, because they had never developed a love for God or the people under their care. They had not repented of their own sins, even though they readily pointed out the sins of others. And while they claimed to be God's willing servants, they weren't truly following his will.

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself which son you most resemble in this story? Have you wondered if you would be considered an obedient child in this scenario? The truth is that we all start out in the same place. The Bible tells us that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's standard of righteousness. In the beginning, we are all like the first son. Our father has told us what he expects of us, but we have rejected his word. So, if we all start out in the same place, what determines which son we become in the story?

If you are a follower of Jesus this morning, then at some point you have changed your mind. You have turned away from a life of disobedience and chosen to believe that God's ways are higher than your ways. You have received his free gift of grace for yourself and are no longer bound by guilt and sin. You have entered into a relationship with God as his child, and you can now call him Father. What separates the first son in the story from the second isn't belief. Both sons knew their father and heard his voice. The difference between them is that the first son ultimately followed his father's instructions, while the second son did not. The difference was not in their belief; the difference was what that belief produced in them. The first son was faithful, but the second son was unfaithful.

Jesus went on to tell a second parable, which illustrated the consequences of becoming like the second son.

Parable 2 – The result of unfaithfulness [Read Matthew

21:33-44]

This parable was an indictment of the religious leaders of Israel, who had been given the blessing and responsibility of caring for the souls of his flock, but who had time and again abused and even killed God's messengers. They had grown hungry for power and influence to the point that any expression of God's wisdom and power that didn't originate with them was seen as threatening. And the implications for this are brutal and clear, as Jesus used the parable to predict what these same leaders would soon do to him, the Landowner's Son.

His warning to them at the end of the story was clear. If God's people are unfaithful with what he has given them, and continue down the road of disobedience—if they continue to pay lip service to their faith—his kingdom will depart from them, and he will give it to someone else, who will produce the proper fruit.

IV. Application

What does this mean for us today? Friends, though Jesus directed these parables to the religious leaders of his day, we would do well to hear them as a warning to the church in our day. Through Jesus Christ, we are now the spiritual Israel, God's chosen people, and we have been given the responsibility and privilege to produce fruit according to the riches of the gospel. But make no mistake, we are not simply *invited* to bear fruit, we are *commanded* to do so. Where we do not, we have ceased to be the obedient church, and have instead become like the second son, who proclaimed his commitment to the father's will, without any intention of doing it.

Following Jesus is not a spectator sport. It is not enough to come to church on Sunday and learn about him. It is not enough even to believe what the Bible says about him. True faith,

genuine belief, requires more of us than just knowing about Jesus; it requires a relationship with him that is founded upon a deep and abiding trust and confidence in him as our Lord and Savior. And that kind of faith doesn't exist without the accompanying obedience to his commands. "If you love me," Jesus said. "Then keep my commandments." If we would become faithful sons and daughters of the King, Christ calls us to radical obedience to his commands to love God and love one another. We do this by actively obeying all of his instructions in scripture, and by confronting the wickedness of this present age with the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross to set people free from the guilt and bondage of sin, and was raised again in victory over death.

Like all of you, I have watched the church in America lose its witness to our culture. We have become far too adept at pointing out the sins of those who are living far apart from God and need him desperately, and far too hesitant to repent of our own sin. We have grown silent in the face of growing evil of every kind, when God has called us to proclaim his justice and mercy loudly on the streets. Frankly, I think the church became comfortable with its influence in our society at one time, and we have been struggling ever since to hold on to that power, through compromise.

This same compromise is present in our individual lives, as well, when we choose to follow the wisdom of the world and reject the clear and life-altering wisdom of scripture. We have allowed ourselves to become people who go to church, when Jesus Christ has called us to *be* the church. Obedience is an active pursuit, but we have too often become passive in our faith. And as a result, we are no longer bearing the proper fruit.

This hit home for me personally in the last week as God has convicted me of remaining silent for far too long about issues of extreme importance that we face as a church and as a nation. I have failed to talk publicly with you about the

human rights atrocity we know as abortion. I haven't talked about it, because, frankly, I get too emotional. I get physically ill, when I think about what our culture is doing to the most vulnerable in our society in the name of convenience and freedom of personal choice. News headlines this week have been particularly difficult to read and talk about, but God calls us to embody a faith that doesn't shy away from difficult conversations. We have been set free from sin and fear through Jesus Christ, and we are called now to proclaim the good news with confidence and power in the very face of evil of every kind. And this is just one of many areas where I have been silent, and the church has been silent with me.

I believe that God is calling the church in our country to repentance and belief, and that he will use the challenges of our time to strengthen the true church, and to prune her branches, so that we might begin to once again produce a fruitful harvest of saints in the church, who willingly lay down their lives for the sake of the world. But the only way this will ever happen is if we fall on our knees in prayer.

Last week we talked about praying like it matters. If you remember, we committed together to begin praying with more frequency, more focus, and more faith that God is powerful enough to answer our prayers and loves us enough to do so. If we want to become truly faithful in our obedience to God, I believe we have to begin with prayer. First and foremost, we should be praying for God to send his Spirit upon us as individuals and as a church, to convict us and to empower us for mission and ministry to our community.

But I don't think it stops there. Friends, I believe it is time for each of us to take a more active role in following Jesus. Now, I'm not saying that we aren't following him at all. I know that many of you are seeking daily to become more like him. I'm only suggesting that, if we are comfortable with our lives as they are, then we aren't yet following him fully.

He will always lead us out of our comfort zones and into places where we have no choice but to become completely dependent upon him. And only when we commit to following him into those unknown places will we ever receive the richest blessings that he wants to give us.

I believe that God has more planned for each one of us than we can possibly imagine. He wants to make us holy and loving and compassionate. He wants us to live lives that are so different from the world that people can't help but want what we have. He wants us to produce a harvest of righteousness, both in our own lives and in the lives of those we meet, as we introduce them to Jesus, and invite them into the family. And it all starts when we invite Jesus to completely wreck our lives.

Are you ready to take the next step in your journey with Jesus? Are you ready to surrender that thing you have been holding onto so tightly? Are you ready to ask God to make you fully obedient to his word? Are you ready to see the unknown places that Jesus will lead you, if you let him? Are you ready to trust him fully and completely with your worries, your relationships, your finances, your health, or whatever it is that you have been afraid to let go of? If so, I want to invite you to pray this prayer with me.

V. Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have loved us so much that you sent your Son Jesus to die on a cross for our disobedience. We confess that, even though you have offered us freedom from sin, we don't always follow your commands. Father, we repent of our unfaithfulness as individuals and as a church, and we ask that you would send your Spirit on us now to cleanse us from any sin that remains in us, and make us holy as you are holy.

And Father, we are tired of treating our faith like a

spectator sport. We are tired of paying lip service to our commitment to following you. So, we ask that you would transform our hearts this morning. Would you set them on fire with your love? Would you teach us how to become a people of prayer? Would you show us how to reach our community with the good news? And would you give us the courage and the strength to act in the face of great evil, to proclaim your kingdom come?

Thank you, Jesus, for your faithfulness. Thank you for your church. Thank you for all the saints who have believed you and proved it with their lives. Thank you, that you are making all things new. Thanks you for rescuing us. Thank you for loving us. Thank you for leading us. We love you, Jesus! And we commit our lives to you from this day forward. Amen.