

“A New Year”

Isaiah 43:16-21; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

January 1, 2023

Now before I met Natalie, I’ve got to tell y’all, the idea that I would ever draw a sermon illustration from a musical would’ve seemed preposterous to me. But you know how women always make their men better by broadening their horizons, well, Natalie’s no different. One of the musicals Nat familiarized me early on in our relationship with is *Man of La Mancha*. It’s the musical retelling of Miguel Cervantes novel “Don Quixote.” The story focuses largely around two principal characters. Don Quixote, he’s “the dreamer of impossible dreams, lover of those who won’t love him back, jousts with windmills.” The other character is Sancho Panza, his faithful follower who never dreamed of something better or dared to color outside the lines.”

In a lot of ways, it seems to me that the vast majority of mainline denominational churches in America have become Sancho Panzas, content with “muddling along or merely surviving.” As a result of shooting just for survival, these churches are failing left and right across the country. You see, when a church’s main ambition is just to hold on, it is, by definition, overly fixated on meeting its own ends and not necessarily the Lords. Folks, I don’t want to be a part of a church aiming merely to survive and I trust you don’t either.” I want to be part of a church filled with Don Quixotes, unafraid to dream the impossible dream. A church that loves unconditionally and dares to take on the world and shake it until it rattles. I pray to be a part of a church that thrives on the inherent risks of the Great Commission” of Jesus Christ to make disciples of all the nations. So, in the name of the Lord our God I’m asking you all to join together with me on this mission. To turn this small band of faithful believers into an army of Jesus Christ, filled with His spirit, sharing his message of forgiveness of redemption into West Charlotte and the world beyond.

The great news revealed to us in Scripture is that this isn’t an IMPOSSIBLE DREAM, not by any stretch of the imagination. Rather, it’s the desire God holds for this church just as he hopes it for all congregations who worship Him. And what makes me so confident to say that is that it’s recorded over and over again in Scripture. So, over the next several sermons I’ll preach with the exception of next week, for Epiphany, we’ll be exploring The New Testament as well as the Old Testament with a simple aim – to show how our church is called to reflect the aims of our creator God. These aims are to gather, to educate, to nurture, to equip for ministry and to send into the world to proclaim the gospel.

Scripture is going to show us that each of these acts are woven into God’s being. Having been created in the image of God, they’re etched upon our hearts as well. The Book of Acts reveals that the church is the means by which we’re drawn together by the Holy Spirit to express our God-given purpose –to heal and reconcile a broken world in the name of Jesus Christ. And the church does this by gathering, educating, nurturing, equipping and sending. It’s in our genes. It’s the shape of our mission. And I believe as we, Cook’s Church set about doing these five simple things with greater focus and renewed passion, we’re going to find this church overflowing with people just as our own hearts will be overflowing with contentment, joy and love.

So today we’re going to talk about the first act the church is called to perform as the body of Christ on Earth... Gathering. Fundamentally, Gathering is God’s ardent desire to lead His people together to a place of healing and hope. Throughout the Scriptures God is shown gathering His people back away from darkness into the light. It happens in the Exodus. It happens over and over again in Judges. This coming reading from the prophecy of Jeremiah brings us face to face with a God who longs to return his people back from exile into his embrace. Here’s the really amazing part –it’s God’s people who chose estrangement from him in the first place.

“For thus says the Lord: ‘Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, ‘O Lord, save Your people, the remnant of Israel.’ Behold, I will bring them from the north country and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, the pregnant woman and she who is in labor, together; a great company, they shall return here. With weeping they shall come, and with pleas for mercy I will lead them back, I will make them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble, for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn. You see, the people in Jeremiah’s time were merely paying lip-service to God and God’s ways. God cried out to them like a parent seeing their child recklessly running into oncoming traffic to follow an errant ball. “STOP” he said. “DON’T GO THERE!” he yelled. And yet God’s people chose to follow the evil inclinations of their own

hearts.” But instead of washing His hands of His people, *God loved them enough to gather them back from the edge of darkness into his presence.*

God’s love isn’t limited by condition. He adores His children in such a way that will always reach out to them to bring them back home. So, He works without rest, gathering His people back to the place where He knows they should’ve been all along. *“With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back”* says our God.

Jesus Christ, being the co-eternal Son of God is no different than His Father. He aims to gather God’s people back home to safety as well. In fact, Christ’s Incarnation came about in the fullness of time for no other reason than to gather the lost, the poor and the sin-sick back into God’s passionate embrace. In a hundred different ways, Jesus Christ proclaims gathering of the lost to be a vital part of his mission. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares, *“for I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”* In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a crowd full of Sancho Panzas that God had anointed Him *“to bring good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”* Then Jesus tells stories of gathering, of joyous returns. A lost coin, searched for until found. A prodigal son embraced by his father with love even after blowing his inheritance. In the Gospel of John, Jesus likens Himself to the Good Shepherd, the one who seeks out his sheep and gathers them back into the flock. Jesus Christ declares Himself to be the one who cries out to the world and finds His people responding to His voice, no matter what their circumstances. You and I, somehow, we’ve responded to His voice. It’s amazing thing to think about, really. Somehow, someway, we’ve been gathered into God’s flock through the loving arms of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. *We’ve been gathered by this gathering God into His church. But the story doesn’t end there.*

One of the great problems of modern Christianity is that somewhere along the way we became overly fixated on our OWN PERSONAL salvation. It’s the operating premise which allows us to sit in pews without ever heading out to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. “After all, I believe in Jesus Christ and so I’m saved” we think. “What difference does it make *to me* if someone else believes or not?” But you see, in the process of reducing Christianity to our own personal salvation, we’ve over-looked that the story neither begins nor ends with us. It’s about God’s plan to heal and reconcile a hurt and broken world. No doubt, we benefit from being gathered back into God’s light, but this happened only so that we would willingly go back into the broken world to gather the other lost souls out there.

In the Book of Acts, the earliest disciples of Christ were intent on gathering in the name of our Lord. Filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, the earliest church was able to do such amazing things that it led people to bring the poor and sick to the church for healing and hope. And those people, having been gathered into the fold by a loving, gathering God, turned outward to gather others. That’s what our church is called to do as well.

Make no mistake about it – any church that doesn’t make gathering one of its primary goals is doomed to fail. And the reason is that such a church wouldn’t reflect God. God’s love *by its very nature* seeks to gather in the outsider. As soon as a church loses sight of that, then it fundamentally misses its reason for existence.

Here’s what happens when a church only pays lip-service to gathering the lost, the poor, the sin-sick and the broken-hearted. It becomes something more akin to a country club than a church of Jesus Christ. In a country club, you pay your dues and you’re assured the best of everything. If something doesn’t work to suit *your needs*, you have every right in the world to complain. Ultimately, country clubs exist solely to cater to their needs of their members.

The Church which reflects God’s desire to gather is 180 degrees removed from a country club mentality. Believe it or not, the church that follows Jesus Christ exists to meet the deepest needs of its NON-MEMBERS. That isn’t to say we ignore folks once they’re here, we’ll talk those topics in the coming weeks. Rather I mean to say that the church fundamentally exists to gather those people who aren’t here yet. Think about it this way – We have a greater duty to fill the empty pew seat beside us more so than anything else in this entire world. Just as God has gathered us, so too we must gather! And the person you fill the pew next to you with isn’t always going to be what the world would consider a prize catch.

It isn’t the case that the church of Jesus Christ exists only to draw in young families with kids. The church of Jesus Christ won’t thrive if it targets affluent people to swell its annual budget. The true church of Jesus Christ aims to gather the poor, the hungry, the sick, the sinner, the broken hearted, the lost. We’re called to speak a

Word of Grace to all people. Those are our target demographics to use market parlance. Those are the people God would have us gather here, into his house for healing and hope for the future.

So how do we do it? How do we gather in the people God would have us reach-out to and thereby reflect his image both for our church and for our members?

Well, we begin by embracing our own brokenness. We can't speak to broken people unless we accept that we're deeply flawed ourselves. I'll never forget a story I heard from my AA friends about a man finding himself in a deep hole. People pass by, the man cries out. "Hey, I'm in a hole, please help me." People peer in the whole and yet can't help him at all. "I don't know what to do with you" they say. Some offer to pray for him but, in the end, they leave him, alone in the darkness of his hole. Just when the man believed his situation to be beyond the possibility of hope, a new person arrives at the edge of the hole. He climbs down into the hole with the man. Before the man can even cry out, the descending person says "hey, I've found myself in a hole myself once or twice. Let me show you how to get out."

Folks, we need to get comfortable sharing our stories of what life was like in that hole and how God got us out of it before we can hope to gather in God's people. That means we can no longer pretend to be "just fine" people who're always "just fine." We need to lay claim to the fact that, at our core, we're sinful people who are loved by a God whose love will never let us go. It means abandoning our self-serving pretense to be perfectly respectable people and instead accept ourselves as deeply flawed yet deeply loved by the Lord Jesus Christ. When we do that, we live more comfortably with one another, gossip fades away allowing us to love and be loved in new, wonderful ways.

Making gathering a foundation of our church means reorienting ourselves. It means in a lot of ways we need to start asking ourselves some difficult questions – "Why don't we have any members from the apartments around us?" "Are we even trying to speak a word of consoling grace to the recently divorced or the alcoholic or the newly bereaved?" "How will we convey the love of God to a generation that is largely rejecting the idea of God altogether?" Ultimately, we need to ask NOW – "What are we going to do in 2023 to gather?"

In a lot of ways, I think we do this gathering in a less direct means than you might imagine. For too long, we've thought of evangelism as a "take-it-or-leave-it proposition." You offer the good News. You tell people they'd better get with the program and fast or face the consequences. Somehow, people are supposed to just leap at the opportunity immediately.

The fact of the matter is it rarely works like that. I recall a story about a woman who'd read that cod liver oil would really help her dog's eczema. So, every day she'd pin this little dog down, force open its gullet and pour the cod liver oil in. Over and over that struggle would go. An epic battle being played out each and every morning. Then, one day, the dog made a preemptive strike, knocking the opened bottle out of its owner's hands, spilling its contents all over the floor. The woman thought, "That's it, I give up." Here's the amazing thing. Soon she saw the little dog was just lapping up that cod liver oil off the floor like nobody's business. Turned out the dog *liked* what was good for it but hated being pinned down against its will.

We'll never be good gatherers if we make similar tactics the means by which we reach-out to others in the name of our Lord. Instead, we're called to reach out into this community and let everyone know the love of God with ongoing fervor. It'll take time and dedication. It will take every single set of hands in this church engaged in a sustained effort. It won't happen overnight but, make no mistake about it...it will happen.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.