

BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH JUNE 18, 2023

**Church Is Not for Spectators!
Rev. Becky Stephens**

Text: Matthew 9:35-38 NLT God's Word: Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19 NLT

Matthew 9:35-38 NLT

³⁵ Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages of that area, teaching in the synagogues and announcing the Good News about the Kingdom. And he healed every kind of disease and illness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ He said to his disciples, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. ³⁸ So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields."

As we see in our Gospel Lesson for this morning, we, the Church are called to go outside!!!

Recently, a friend told her daughter about a church burning down. Confused, the child furrowed her brow and asked, "If a church is not a building, but a group of people, how can you burn down a church?"

To those of us living in 21st Century America, we are prone to think of the church as the building, but, to that false model, the Apostle Paul announces in Acts Chapter 17: "*The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.*"

Jesus taught us that God lives inside of people, you and I, and that our bodies are the temple of God! That means that wherever you are...wherever I am...there is the Church!!! What a huge responsibility! What a huge privilege!!!

For Jesus said, "*On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.*" We need not be afraid of those who can kill the body. We need not be afraid of those who might get angry when we share the message of Christ. We need not be afraid of standing up for the Gospel of Jesus Christ! The gates of hell will not overcome us. The minions of hell will not win!

Rather, be afraid of not sharing the Gospel, because Jesus is Lord and Jesus wins!

Jesus calls us to make followers of Jesus Christ to change the world! Jesus calls us to be people living with ‘Messy Lives’ who join hands with other ‘Messy People’ to follow Jesus!!!

Are we doing this, or is church just a building to us? Are we hiding inside our building—afraid to go outside and offer Christ to a lost, broken and dying world? Christianity was never meant to be a spectator sport, but so often we treat it like one.

I will share a tidbit of information about myself with you this morning that I bet you never knew. Over the years, I have enjoyed traveling down to Atlanta and watching the Atlanta Braves play professional baseball. I grew up rooting on the Braves and following their successes and failures. The picture you are seeing is of Olivia at her first Atlanta Braves game. We had the best seats in the house!



Avid baseball fans arrive at the stadiums hours before the games, carrying coolers and wearing team shirts and hats. Many of these fans look as if they haven't played sports themselves since high school. Watching professional sports requires a lot of eating and standing in lines for the bathrooms. Occasionally something exciting happens on the field, and people spill their drinks as they stand to cheer the player who has just scored one for the team.

But as Christians, were we made to be spectators or players—fans or followers? Being a fan of Jesus is not the same as being a follower. You and I are invited to step up from the crowd of the curious to join the team of the committed! Jesus' ministry was a living out of the good news...and as followers or apprentices of Jesus...this is our calling as well!!!

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning, we see that Jesus “*went through all the towns and villages, teaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*”

In other words, “Jesus was outside preaching the good news and when He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they had such ‘messy lives.’ They were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

The word which is used for compassion here is the strongest word for pity in the Greek language. It describes the compassion which moves people to the depths of their being! Jesus was moved to the depths of His being when He saw—the crowd of ordinary people--living with ‘messy lives.’ Jesus was moved to the depths of His being when Jesus saw you and me. Jesus is moved to the depths of His being when Jesus sees all the other folks living around us with ‘messy lives.’

And we, the Body of Christ on this earth, are called to be moved to the depths of our being when we see our fellow human beings...we are to join hands with them and follow Jesus together!!!

Christianity is not a spectator sport. Christians are not to merely be ‘fans’ of Jesus. Instead, Christianity is a distinctive way of life! Following Jesus requires much more than having ‘orthodox’ beliefs and attending religious services. Christianity means much more than reading the Bible to look for the pages of Scripture which confirm what we already think or how we currently live. Christianity is supposed to subvert our thinking, confront our way of life, and produce a change of heart and action!

Many of us may be quite captivated by Jesus, without surrendering ourselves to the discipline and endurance that is necessary to become a follower of Jesus’ ways! We can feel naked and agonizing when we realize that our sense of identity is not matched by our actions!

In some ways, it is actually a terrifying thing to be invited to be a follower of Jesus. John the Baptist, the desert-dwelling, locust eating prophet, said that he was not even worthy to untie the sandals of Jesus’ feet. Jesus told the crowds of spectators or fans, *“If anyone wants to follow me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.”*

We are called to be open to transformation! We are called to be open to change! And this means we are called to assume the humble posture of amateurs in our approach to Jesus—unsure of our own abilities but confident in the care of the Master! We are to be people living with ‘messy lives’ joining hands to follow Jesus!!!

Christianity was never meant to be confined to an hour on Sunday morning. It is a 24/7 radical way of life! It is a 24/7 radical way of life based on God’s grace—not

on our snobbish exclusiveness! It is a 24/7 radical way of life based on the heart—not the pocketbook! It is shaped by regular worship, the regular study of Scripture, daily prayer, fasting and Christian fellowship. It is something that is to become 2nd nature! It is our soul and our body that make us human, but it is God's Holy Spirit and our discipline in following Jesus that make us Christian!!!

We are called to jump out of the stands—change into our game clothes—and run out onto the field!!! And just like in baseball, basketball, football or any other kind of sport—you play the way you practice!!!

If we don't practice how to be Christians—24/7—it will be very difficult to be persons who walk like, talk like, and play like those who follow Jesus!!! Christianity is something we must 'learn.' And we learn from the Master as we-- people living with 'messy lives' -- join hands and follow Jesus!!!

There were 30 people who attended Beth-el United Methodist Church in Tennessee. Now the Church has 135 members and recently moved into a new, 5,000-Square-foot building. The congregation had tried canvassing the middle-class to upper middle-class neighborhoods surrounding the church...but the folks didn't seem much interested.

Eventually, they began to reach places where no one was inviting people to church. This included knocking on every mobile home door within five miles of the church building. Soon, children, most who never attended worship gatherings before, started filling Beth-el pews on Sunday mornings.

At the time, most of the members were in their 60s and 70s. The kids were unruly, undisciplined, and many times they didn't bathe. So in order to have these youth come, it took a lot of older Christians to take them under their wings, to teach them how to be in church. Each child was assigned an adult who would sit with them during worship. The mentors taught their mentees how to respect the sanctuary and how to quietly bow their heads during prayer. Most of the children were from low-income families and often did without necessities. Many came to church hungry.

One girl was reprimanded several times for rolling all over a pew. Though asked to stop, she continued. She explained that the pew "felt so good." You see, this girl slept on a linoleum floor at home. The padded pew felt much better than the cold, hard floor.

Church members also transported the children to church on Sunday mornings. They decided that anyone asking for a ride would be picked up—no matter where they lived! Members also took the children on outings.

The pastor of the church is quoted as saying, “Love is the key to any growth. As long as any person in any church has the capacity to love, they have the capacity to grow.”

Seeking to follow God is a ‘messy process’ that intersects with the most personal aspects of our humanity! It is not a spectator sport!

According to our Gospel Lesson for this morning, *“When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples” ...that’s you and that’s me... “he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’”*

Later in verses 7 and 8 of Chapter 10 Jesus tells those who do indeed “go”:
“As you go, preach this message, ‘The kingdom of heaven is near. Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.’”

According to statistics, over 50% of those living in our community do not have a church home—do not have a relationship with Jesus—they are living as people who are *“harassed and helpless.”* They are *“like sheep without a shepherd.”*

Jesus has compassion on them...Jesus is moved to the depths of His being... Do we, as the Body of Christ, have this Jesus Compassion as well? People with ‘messy lives’ joining hands to follow Jesus.

Bucyrus United Methodist Church. God has great plans for this community. We have been blessed with great privilege. And with great privilege comes great responsibility!

Are we willing to part company with the way things have always been done—and embrace a radical new vision? Are we willing to make Christianity, not only something we believe, but also—our way of life? If so, strap yourselves in. We are going to have a wild, wild ride!!! Amen.