

What I Learned On My Summer Vacation

After a five week break from writing and preaching sermons I wasn't sure if I could do this again. It took me awhile to get started, trying to decide what I was to share with you on this first Sunday back. I decided to call this message, What I Learned On My Summer Vacation. I spent most of my time away just resting and reading. I did manage to get addicted to NCIS, CSI and Law and Order while I was gone, but I enjoyed the time catching up on some long neglected things around the house and catching up on some reading.

I read the Chronicles of Narnia in the order C.S. Lewis recommended and then, remember that list of books I showed you in the message: Rediscovering the Church? Well, I added three books to that list. ***Quitting Church; Giving Church Another Chance;*** and ***So You Don't Want To Go To Church Anymore.*** There were a few other books I read, but as I reflected on some of what I read I began to hear something in my spirit that I believe I am to share with you this morning. Although I called this what I learned on my vacation, I'm not sure I've learned these lessons yet. It might be more accurate to say here are five things I heard on my summer vacation. This isn't much of a sermon perhaps, but after all, I'm out of practice. Just let me talk to you for a few minutes. These may be rather disconnected things, but here is the first thing I heard. With regard to the books I read, there appears to be a growing trend concerning folks, Christians, followers of Christ, who have grown tired of the church and have given up on it. To be honest, I've grown weary of the hype and gimmicks and stuff that goes on in the name of the church in America. Tired of all the programs and effort required. If we were honest, there are folks here this morning who are here out of obligation, out of habit, or just hoping to earn points with God, or not even certain why they are here, it's just what they do on Sunday. There are folks here but they aren't expecting much, or they feel like the church and God and the faith hasn't exactly delivered on some of what was promised. I understand. I feel that way somedays, but listen to me...

Don't give up on the church - God hasn't. Jesus said in Matthew 16, **"I will build my church and the gates of hell will not overcome it."** **Matthew 16:18** For two thousand years he has done that. In spite of our failures and sins, in spite of the shortcomings and out and out apostasy of the church at times, in spite of modernism

and neglect, in spite of shallow teaching and shallow living, in spite of compromise and abuse, in spite of excesses and craziness of all varieties and kinds, Jesus is still building his church. Don't give up on it.

One of the books I read entitled *Quitting Church* outlined why the faithful have given up on church and are no longer attending. I understand some of the reasons the author outlines. They are tired of programs that deny the real issues of life, tired of trying to belong and feeling alone, tired of services that are boring and irrelevant, tired of gimmicks and the failure of the church to speak the truth. But in spite of that, and I have been in the church and seen it at its best and at its worst for 55 years, in spite of all of its mistakes and failures, I'm here to tell you, don't give up on the church. Jesus hasn't. We mustn't.

We are living in a changing period of time, a hinge period. It remains to be seen what the church will look like in 15-20 years. The form, the systems, the methodologies of ministry, it is all changing and perhaps none of that matters too much as long as we don't give up on the church. There have always been times when people abandoned the church. Sometimes they walked away in apostasy and sin, but sometimes folks simply grew tired of attending lifeless services, tired of the routine, tired because it felt like they were going through the motions without growing in Christ. I understand. But as surely as there have been times when people were giving up on the church, there have been times of reformation and times of refreshing.

I read about a young Italian in the 13th century named Giovanni de Pietro de Bernardone. While praying in a small chapel alone he heard the Lord speak to him these simple words: "Go and repair my house. You see it is falling down." The young man became something of an extraordinary evangelist. The world knows him as St. Francis of Assisi. God is still speaking to people to repair his house, to get his church in order. Don't give up on the church. He is still calling reformers. You may or may not like all the reforms, all the changes, but there are a couple of things you can't get away from – a couple of things you must not get away from.

1) We need each other. We need the encouragement. We need the support we receive from each other. It is an isolating, lonely environment out there. We need to be together. Whether that is in small groups or large, in house churches or on Sunday

morning services in church facilities, we need to meet together somehow because we need each other.

2) We need the gifts we bring to the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:16 tells us that the whole body of Christ is built up and grows as each member does its work and fulfills its part, its role. We are the body of Christ and we are only his body as we relate appropriately to one another.

3) We need the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper. We will be receiving communion this evening. Jesus gave us this instruction to do this, to eat and drink together. It is vital to our spiritual health and well being and you won't receive communion if you stop being part of a church. It is not to be taken lightly. We need the church. If this church or your church isn't what it ought to be, commit to working to make it all Jesus wants it to be today, in this cultural environment. But don't give up on the church, Jesus hasn't and as long as he is building his church we need to be a part, engaged and fully participating. Please understand, I'm not scolding anyone for poor attendance. It's not about our attendance, it's not about your level of commitment to our services or the programs of this church, but it is about our commitment to doing life together as his body. Don't give up on the church, instead, commit to Christ and his people and his commands and let's see where he takes us.

Don't give up on holy living. It seems like we are so surrounded by sinfulness and compromise that we wonder if it's possible to live a holy life pleasing to Christ. The bible instructs us to be holy even as he is holy but we look and sound pretty worldly most of the time. The rate of sexually active singles is about as high among believers as non-believers. The divorce rate in the church is about like that of the unchurched. Christians, believers are finding themselves addicted to gambling, to drugs and alcohol. What's the answer? Do we preach a little harder at sin? Do we draw the lines broader, deeper, bolder? Do we go back to spelling out the sins and pointing fingers at the sinners, naming names? Can we shame or scold people into living a holy life? Is that the answer?

It hasn't worked in the past has it? For 100 years of Pentecost, I'm not sure we accomplished much challenging people to be holier by trying harder. The reason is because trying harder to be holy works like trying harder to diet. It works fine until you

get really hungry, or bored, or tired, or depressed, and you need a donut, and a snickers bar, and a bag of cheetos. But you'll try harder next time. And in the mean time, you feel awful and condemned and you go to church and hear the preacher tell you what a terrible person you are because you sinned and ate a donut and a snickers bar and a bag of cheetos. And you are thinking, "and he doesn't even know about the ice cream. I shouldn't even be here." And somehow you've missed the point. It isn't about how hard you try to be holy and sinless and in this example, thin. It's about why fill your life and your mouth with painful destructive stuff when Jesus wants to fill your life with his presence?

Wayne Jacobsen in his book, *So You Don't Want To Go To Church Anymore*, wrote, **"Walking toward him is walking away from sin. The better you know him the freer from it you will be. But you can't walk away from sin...not in your own strength....Every act of sin results from your mistrust of his love and intentions for you. We sin to fill up broken places, to try to fight for what we think is best for us, or by reacting to our guilt and shame. Once you discover how much he loves you, all that changes. As you grow in trusting him, you will find yourself increasingly free from sin."** Wayne Jacobsen

While the notion of spiritual discipline and personal discipline has its place, may I suggest that **Living a holy life may have more to do with getting to know Jesus and falling deeper and deeper in love with him than in trying harder to keep all the rules.** In our own strength we will likely fail and fall again and again, but as we learn to live in his strength and in his life and in his love, the idea of sinning and grieving him, or the idea of trusting anything or anyone else to fill up the broken places of our life will seem foreign to us. We won't want to sin. We want to live with him, for him. We want to live like him, in his grace. We want to live a holy life which means a life lived with him, a life pleasing to him. Don't give up on living a holy life. Try harder by digging deeper into a life lived with Jesus, aware of his presence and mercy and grace at work in your life every moment of every day.

Don't give in to the gods of relevance. I don't have time to read the entire book or chapter to you this morning that would better explain what I mean by this point. Lesson carefully to this because I don't want anyone to misunderstand. I'm certainly

not arguing for irrelevance. The church must be relevant, i.e. pertinent, attending to the issues at hand. We have to speak to the issues of the day, but understand how we must do that. In the language that is understood by the crowd before us, we must communicate the message of the gospel. It is that message alone that changes lives.

By the “gods of relevance” I’m referring to that pull that says “do whatever you must to get a crowd, to keep a crowd, to wow the crowd.” Do whatever it takes to build your church and to tie people to the programs of the church. And somewhere along the way, we miss the point. We’ve lost the plot as they say. We figure out what will please the audience, but we’ve stopped asking what pleases Jesus. What does he desire? What does he want for you? What does he want for us as a church? What is Jesus doing? Where is he doing it? Relevant. Popular. Appealing. I hope so. I don’t want our church or the message of the gospel to be irrelevant, unpopular or unappealing. There is no point in doing something that everyone hates. But at the same time, how appealing can taking up a cross and following the crucified Savior be to anyone? **The question must begin not with “is this relevant and popular” but rather “is this faithful to the gospel and obedient to Christ?”**

We are here to serve the Lord Jesus Christ, not the gods of relevance or popularity. We are here to speak the truth, to announce the good news, to be and make disciples and followers of Christ. We mustn’t give in to anything else.

Don’t stop relying upon the Holy Spirit. I am committed to excellence in ministry. I am committed to doing my best and giving my best to preparing and preaching the truth to you. But as hard as I try and as skillful or unskillful as I may be, I am foolish to think that my words can bring you to a place of decision for Christ, or bring you to a place of surrender or bring you to conviction about anything, apart from the presence and anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is God’s Spirit at work in this place that makes the difference. I know that.

I know too that our services have changed over the years. Some would think we aren’t as spiritual as we used to be. “Folks don’t shout like they used to shout. Our services don’t seem as emotional or as spiritually boisterous as they used to.” That may or may not be, depending upon your viewpoint, but don’t think we’ve learned so much that we needn’t rely upon the Holy Spirit. Trust me, we can’t make it without his

leading, his direction, his anointing, his conviction, his revelation of truth to our hearts and to our spirit.

Let me ask you, where do you think the kingdom of God is right now? Where do you think the Spirit of God is right now? How real do you think this spiritual kingdom is? Is it far off somewhere? Is God looking down on us? Is his Holy Spirit being held somewhere waiting to be released upon us? I think the Kingdom of God is so real that God could pull back a curtain right now and we could see into his kingdom. I believe the Spirit of God is here among us, his kingdom is present here among us and we need to recognize that and rely absolutely and completely upon him and his present grace. Rely upon the presence of the Holy Spirit. Rely upon him to be present with you through every situation you face. Trust him to reveal Jesus to you in ways you have never known or experienced. Don't stop relying upon the Holy Spirit's work in this church and in your life. Finally,

Don't put your hope in anything but Christ alone. Most of you know my Dad moved in with us a year ago this month. Just in the past two months we've had an estate sale and we are in the process of selling his house. It has been an unusual experience. I know many of you have gone through this, going through everything in the house, piece by piece, reliving so many memories as you handle each piece and then place it aside, preparing it for sale, realizing that those items that have been a part of your life, all of your life, won't be there any longer. 91 years of living, 60 years of marriage and it's all given away, disposed of, sold for a few dollars.

I stood at Shredder's Inc a few days ago and watched as some of my dad's records and cancelled checks from the past 50 plus years were shredded. Watching those sharp iron teeth chewing away at something of the paper history of my father it really struck me forcefully again, how foolish we are to lean upon our flesh, to rely upon our strength, to put our hope in anything connected to this earth.

John's epistle says, **"Do not love the world or anything in the world...for everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever."** 1 John 2:15-17

“What he has and does”, the stuff we love, the stuff we crave, the stuff we desire, the stuff we acquire – all of it is passing away, sold, shredded, discarded, turned to dust and decay. And what remains is the unseen things - that which pertains to the eternal. “The man who does the will of God lives forever.” John said. At the end of your life, all that remains is your Christ like character and your godly influence. Trusting in anything or anyone besides Jesus is folly. Putting your hope in anything that is not eternal is folly. Living for anything that will not last beyond the grave is foolish. Put your hope in God and you will not be disappointed, not in this life and not in the life to come.

What I learned on my summer vacation:

Don't give up on the church. God hasn't.

Don't give up on living a holy life. Move deeper into the life Jesus has for you, learn how deep his love for you runs and see what happens.

Don't give in to the gods of relevance. Keep it real in Jesus.

Don't stop relying upon the Holy Spirit.

Don't put your hope in anything but Christ alone.