

Acts 2:37-47 “Do Numbers Really Matter?”

We're in week four of Eastertide, and week three of our “Good News is Coming” series. I want to take us back a couple of weeks to remind you what inspired me to take us on this journey in the first place. This all started when I read an article called, *Can the Christian Church Outlast the Next Decade?* The author concluded that the church is declining because we don't know what our good news is. And I disagree. We know what our good news is. The good news is that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. Bridging the gap. Opening the veil. Pushing out the tired old structures built on selfishness, greed, and oppression and ushering in a new system built on justice, mercy, and equality. Jesus' message was, “The kingdom of God is at hand!” Great. Then that's *our* message too. Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news!” As Christ's church that's our job too. So I disagree with the author of this article. We know what the good news is. We just get distracted by less important things. And I get that. It's so hard to stay on task sometimes, especially if there's a lot of things to keep track of.

Back in college, I attended a seminar designed to help church leaders become better managers. It was led by Ted Engstrom, who at the time was the head of Youth for Christ, the parachurch youth ministry that inspired me to follow Jesus. He said that the secret to management can be summed up like this: “Decide what is important. Do it. Decide what is not important. Don't do it.” Sounds pretty simple, right? What I eventually learned is that the church often tries to convince you that *everything* is important. “Decide what is important? Do it? Decide what is not important? Don't do it!?” Pfft. What I discovered in ministry and management in general is that the real imperative is, “Whatever you are doing is not nearly as important as what others think you should be doing.”

Every committee thinks that their ministry should be your top priority. Every group in the church thinks that their challenges should receive

your fullest attention. And I know that Dr. Engstrom knew this. That's why he said it in the first place. Where the learning takes place is knowing and understanding what your mission is all about. That's where you make the decisions about what is most important. When we know what our mission is, then we can decide what is most important. And again, we know what our mission is. Jesus spelled that one out on day one when he launched his public ministry. Our mission is to deliver the good news. We know what that good news is: "God is reconciling the world to God through Christ." That means that our most important priorities should reflect this. In other words, "If it doesn't have something to do with delivering the good news, then it shouldn't be at the top of our priority list." That doesn't make ministry any easier though does it? So since we know what our good news is, and we know that it should be at the top of our priority list, what are we supposed to *do*?! Good question. Let's take a look at what Jesus told his disciples to do.

Since we've been in Luke's gospel, let's see what Jesus' departing words to his disciples were after his resurrection and before he ascended into the heavens. In chapter 24 of Luke, the disciples were talking about Jesus' resurrection and all the people who had seen him. And while they were talking about this, Jesus appeared and stood among them. They were scared at first, but once that fear passed, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the scriptures." And then he said, in verses 46-48, "Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Then he tells the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit to equip them. And we'll be talking much more about this in two weeks at Pentecost in the Park, because when that promise was fulfilled, the church was born.

Want to know something cool? Luke and Acts were written by the same author! So since we've been all about Luke's gospel during Easter, let's jump ahead a little to Acts this morning! Let's go to that second chapter

that we usually reserve for Pentecost Sunday. However I'm going to skip over the part about Holy Spirit rushing into the room where the disciples were waiting. I'm going to skip over what happened when the Holy Spirit came down like tongues of fire on the crowd and allowed them to hear each other in their own languages. I'm even going to skip over the Holy Spirit inspired sermon that Peter preached on that day. We'll save that for June 9th. Where I want to focus our attention today is what happened at the end of Peter's sermon. I want to focus on the crowd's response to his message. Verse 41 says that 3,000 people were baptized that day. Then later, in verse 44-47 the author said that the new believers sold their possessions and goods, distributed the proceeds to all who were in need, and every day they spent time in the temple, they broke bread at home, practiced generosity, praised God and showed good will to all people. And that last sentence in verse 47 – "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved."

We already talked about "salvation" last week and how it's not a one-time event, but rather a *lifestyle*. So every day, more and more people made a change in their old lifestyle to follow Jesus. How many people made that radical lifestyle change right after Peter's sermon? Three thousand. I grew up in a town of about 2,100 outside of Eugene, Oregon. Three thousand was the total number of people who lived in my hometown of Veneta plus the neighboring communities of Crow and Noti. That's just after one sermon. And according to the gospel writer every day that number grew exponentially larger. Could you imagine being part of that? It must have been exciting.

This is where I want to put on the brakes for a bit and go back to where we started this morning. Let's go back to when I said, "We know what the good news is. We just get distracted by less important things." Let's talk about numbers and how important they are in the church. Early on in my faith journey ... back around the same time I attended Ted Enstrom's seminar, numbers were important. Especially in the churches I attended. How many people were in Sunday school? How many people did our missionaries baptize in a year? How many people were

at the all-church dinner last month? How many people came into the church by transfer compared to how many people came into the church by baptism? How much over or under budget were we over the past five years? All these numbers and statistics! We can get overwhelmed by numbers. I have to say that the Independent Christian Church, our cousins in the Stone Campbell movement, are all about numbers. I'm sure I've told you about the story about the day I went to a gathering of Stone-Campbell movement ministers over in Orland not long after I moved here. There was me, one guy from the Churches of Christ, our other cousins, and the other 15-20 people were all from Independent Christian Churches. I was astonished at how obsessed with numbers they were! The first thing that people wanted to know when they met one another was, who are you and how many people attended your church. The first two times people asked, I thought it was sort of a fluke, but after five or six times, it started to get old. A lot of you have discovered that I'm highly allergic to banality. And when I'm trapped in situations where that which is trivial starts to overshadow that which is significant, my smart-alecky, alter ego Skippy wants to come out and play. I thought I had Skippy under control that day. That is until one guy introduced himself to me, inquired about the name of my church, and then, I kid you not, said, "Oh. How big are you?" Before I could reign him in, Skippy said, "Just shy of 5'10" and around 220 depending on what time of day it is and how much I've had to eat." And the meeting went downhill from there.

Here's the thing about numbers. They're great for measuring trends, deciding whether programs are working or not, budgeting, estimating, and planning. Where we get it wrong is when we think numbers are the *goal*. But it's hard *not* to think of numbers as the goal when we read passages like this where the author basically says, "every day the Lord added the population of Kelly Ridge, California to their number." At that rate, you'll only need two and a half months to take over Butte County. No doubt, it's exciting to see that kind of exponential growth. Wouldn't it be great to see that kind of growth in our church? Wouldn't it be great to see that kind of growth in *any* church? But that's not what we are

called to do. We are not called to add to our numbers. We're called to be Disciples. Disciples aren't Christians who go out and gather people to sit in church. They go out and make other Disciples. In fact, Matthew's version of that "great commission" that I read earlier in Luke 24 uses that very word. In Matthew 28, the gospel writer says that Jesus told his disciples to, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Disciples are bearers of the good news. And as Disciples, we are commissioned to go find other people to bear the good news too. And again, we know what our good news is. "God is reconciling the world to God through Christ."

Numbers are not the goal. Numbers can certainly be the *byproduct* of being faithful to the good news, but that's *not* the reason we *exist*. See, I would rather have 12 disciples ... 12 people who get it and who are willing to dedicate their lives to making other disciples than 500 people who are content with just sitting around waiting to receive religious goods and services. And before you get too riled up, let me say this – There is nothing wrong with "receiving religious goods and services." There are seasons in our lives where that is entirely appropriate. There is a time to receive. We need to receive when we're feeling beat down by the world. We need to receive in order to be equipped to be disciples and to make disciples. But there's a time to give too. It's all a part of that salvation lifestyle I was talking about last week. Again ... we know what our good news is. Let's see what we can do when we allow the seeds of that good news to be planted in our hearts. Let's see what we can do when we cultivate those seeds. When we see those seeds sprout and grow, and start to bear fruit. And let's see what happens if we do this, not to get more people to come to church, but to let the world know that God is reconciling the world to God through Christ. Christ is risen.