

## “Stampeding After Him?”

The Scripture reading today was from John 12, a passage that describes Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. In a few days He will be arrested, hastily and illegally tried, and put to death. But now He is entering the Holy City as a kind of hero – welcomed by a crowd that's singing and shouting and praising God! But while the crowd is whooping it up, the Pharisees (a sect of Jewish religious leaders) are beside themselves. I like *The Message* version of this story, and what it says in John 12, verse 19: “*The Pharisees took one look and threw up their hands: ‘It’s out of control. The world’s in a stampede after Him.’*” That sentence got my attention! *Is the world in a stampede after Him?*

When you check out the church scene in the U.S. today, it certainly doesn’t appear as though the world’s stampeding after Jesus! Mainline Protestant denominations have been in serious decline for some 50-60 years.

Reggie McNeal is a church leader and consultant who as much as anyone today has his finger on the heartbeat of the church, and the culture. He argues that since the World War II generation (called “Builders”) *every generation after that has been a different culture!* We had the Baby Boomers, then the Busters, followed by Gen-exers, then Millenials (those born between 1981 and 1996). Some now label the current generation "Generation Z" (anyone born in 1997 or later). To have each new generation represent a different culture is unprecedented in history! And with each new generation, a fewer percent of the people in that generation identify with the institutional church as we’ve known it.

Research done on religion in America has shown that the fastest growing group are those claiming no religious affiliation. "Nones." Currently about 3 out of 10 people in the U.S. claim no religious affiliation. In 2007, those claiming to be "Christians" outnumbered the "nones" by 5 to 1. Now it's a ratio of about 2 to 1.

If there is any connection between being a part of a church and having a commitment to Jesus, it doesn’t appear as though, at least in the U.S., “*the world’s in a stampede after him*”.

*But has that ever been true?* Although it seemed to the Pharisees like the world was stampeding after Jesus, we know what happened a few days later – Jesus hung on a cross. The exuberant crowds are gone, and the Bible says of His disciples, “They all forsook him and fled”

***The cross has a way of thinning out the ranks of those willing to follow Jesus.*** Jesus pulled no punches when He said if you’re going to follow Him, you've got to deny yourself and carry your own cross. Mark 8:34 tells us: "He (Jesus) called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'" The cross meant death.

You want to follow Jesus? We have to be willing to deny ourselves, make sacrifices. We have to be willing to die - die to our self-centered plans and goals, die to the self-focused life

*If Jesus would promise to give us a lot, reward us materially, that could attract a lot of people.*

Jesus fed 5,000 people – gave them free food – and afterwards He couldn't get rid of them! *But later, when Jesus talked in specifics about what it may cost a person to believe in Him, people found His teaching difficult, and it says, "Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66).*

The rich young ruler was intent on following the Lord until Jesus said he would have to put to death his love of wealth, and as a result, the rich young man turned away.

There are some popular preachers today who are having very successful ministries inviting people to follow Jesus, without saying much about self-denial or bearing a cross of suffering. For instance, the so-called "prosperity gospel" proponents. Follow Jesus, obey God, and God promises to be good to your pocketbook and bank account! Now I believe God wonderfully promises to meet our *needs*, but promising earthly wealth is Christianity without a cross (and on the whole is rather selfish!)

I'm thinking of my friends in the church in Kenya. They have little of this world's goods. Are we better Christians than they are, because God is prospering us? I don't think so. Some of them are wonderful followers of Jesus. Some years ago the man who at that time was the pastor of the church in the village of Musese was able to visit the U.S. He came to our home. He walked into our foyer, looked around – remarked with wonder, “a room there...another room there...second story...”. It was the fall season, rather cold – so I offered him several sweaters and jackets. He tried them on, looked approvingly in the mirror. He was thrilled. I didn't even miss the clothing.

When we present a gospel that has a cross in it – self-denial, sacrifice – that can thin out the lines of people waiting to commit themselves to Christ! People don't come stampeding after Him.

*But here's a twist. While the cross is going to keep some people from following Jesus, I believe it's only when those outside the church see Christians and the church denying themselves and taking up the cross, that these nonbelievers will be more likely to follow Jesus!*

I can think of several ways that this self-denial and taking up of our cross happens. ***One way is when the church is less inwardly focused, and reaches out in loving service beyond its walls.*** Many today are very skeptical of the church, and not prone to trust Christians. In some ways, there is good reason for this. Money-grabbing TV preachers with their financial empires and lavish lifestyle. The church covering up sexual abuse committed by clergy. The unsettling fact that Christians don't seem to be living any differently than those who don't claim to be followers of Jesus – studies suggest that Christians have basically the same divorce rate, the same amount of pre-marital sex, even a similar rate in regards to certain crimes. Whereas in previous generations, even those who weren't Christians had a certain amount of respect for the church, and saw churches as a positive in the community, now our culture's response to church is more likely to be hostility, or just plain apathy.

This is the atmosphere in which we do evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. How can we convince an increasing skeptical world of the validity of the Christian faith? Well, the starting point, I think,

is for the church to reach out in loving service to a hurting world – without any selfish or ulterior motives.

A problem is that it's easy for congregations to become ingrown and self-centered. Like any other group or organization, that's the natural flow of things - to get caught up with what those *already in* the organization like or want. But Jesus says we have to sacrifice for others and give our life away if we're going to find it – think less about *us* and more about people outside the church whom *God loves and wants to reach*.

I've already mentioned Reggie McNeal. His books are provocative and worth reading. In his book, *The Present Future*, he tells a story that suggests a new model for evangelism today. Several months after 9/11, his wife Cathy went with a disaster relief team from South Carolina to New York City. Their mission was to clean the apartments of people displaced by the collapse of the World Trade Center. The apartments she cleaned faced the Twin Towers. All the windows had been blown out. Residents had watched people jump from the towers. They found telephones, briefcases, jewelry in apartments, all blown in when towers collapsed. Residents were paying thousands of dollars to get their apartments cleaned. The team sent by the churches cleaned apartments for nothing. They even left gifts behind.

Cathy and her team had to wear disaster relief uniforms just to get into the area. These outfits were conspicuous and got people's attention. All over Manhattan, people stopped them and asked three questions: Where are you from? What are you doing? And why? Cathy said that by the time they answered the first two questions, "We are from South Carolina, here to clean apartments for people displaced by the terrorist attacks," people were willing to listen to the "why" question. They listened because the New Yorkers were convinced that these folk from South Carolina believed something so strongly that they were willing to inconvenience themselves to serve other people.

Another helpful book is called *The Externally Focused Church*. It has many wonderful real life stories of churches that have done similar things – for example, churches that have simply gone to the mayor of their town or city and said, "What do you need? We're here to help." Churches that have adopted a school, and fixed up the playground, tutored children, painted lavatories.

Rick Warren has made millions of dollars writing his bestseller book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Rather than taking the money to feather his own nest egg, he is using his power and influence to mobilize the Church to respond to humanitarian needs on a global scale. He said he wants to use his influence for the benefit of those who have no influence.

See, it's in the DNA of Christians, it's in the bloodstream of the Church, to serve! One day 2 of Jesus' disciples asked Him for a favor: to have a special place of honor and privilege in His kingdom. Jesus responded by saying that the people of the world use their power to lord it over others. But Jesus people are to be different. "So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become

great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). This is one way the church can be different from the world.

Reaching out beyond our walls in a self-forgetting way may not cause the world to stampede after Christ, but I'm convinced it's going to win more people than we're reaching now! Having the church deny itself and take up its cross also means ***working together with other churches for the sake of the kingdom of God, rather than just promoting our own congregation.*** It's easy (and in some ways natural) to make our goal furthering our own local church, growing our own congregation, and make that more important than *building God's kingdom.*

In the Gospel of John, chapter 17, we have the longest recorded prayer of Jesus. In part of that prayer, Jesus prays that His people will be *one*. He prays, "I ask not only on behalf of these (the 12 disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). Notice, that the world may believe! Years ago, I heard a young Roman Catholic priest remind us that not all of Jesus' prayers have been answered. This one hasn't – that His followers may all be one.

Do you think if God's people quit thinking about their own *congregational goals* and worked together for *kingdom goals* that the world might be more likely to believe? Apparently that's what Jesus thought.

It's easy for churches in a community to look at other churches around them and see these churches as "the competition" (in worse cases "the enemy"). It's harder to ask "Is the kingdom advancing in our town/community?" than it is to ask: "Is our church doing well?"

If another church in our area is growing and ours isn't, can we celebrate the growth of God's kingdom in that other place? If a neighboring congregation gets a nice write up in the newspaper on something they're doing, can we avoid being jealous and small about it? Most Sundays I drive home past LCBC church in Ephrata. Their huge parking lot is jammed full. (I think they got over 600 people in attendance the first Sunday they opened). It's hard not to get jealous. What are they doing that's better than us? But I need to rejoice that there are churches like that getting the message of Jesus out to people we can't reach! It's about growing the kingdom of God – not just furthering Community United Methodist!

If people leave our church and go to another church, can we let these people go graciously, without feeling resentful or thinking we've necessarily failed? I spent most of my years of ministry thinking that my job was to keep everybody who came to our church and not let anyone get away! But the last number of years I've been learning that we have to let some people go and give them our blessing. No one church can satisfy everyone's wants or needs.

I'm thinking of a young couple who attended a church I served. The wife, a young mother, found Christ through the ministry of our church. She grew in the Lord. But her husband kind of

dragged his feet spiritually. I met with this couple a number of times. Our church ministered to their family. A group of us went to their home and prayed with them when their baby had to have serious surgery. Gradually their attendance in our church dropped off, and they started to go to a large church in our area. I heard that the mother got baptized, and that her husband was getting involved and was even assuming a leadership role in the church with the men's ministry. I have to admit, all of this hurt. Why did she have to be baptized again? Why couldn't her husband have been more invested in our congregation when they were with us? But you see, when we think "kingdom" instead of harboring jealous or sour grape feelings, we'll rejoice – because someone reached this man for Jesus and His Kingdom!

Jesus prayed that His followers would all be one. Instead of working in competition, what would happen if churches worked more together? I read a book some years ago based on John 17, Jesus' prayer for oneness. The book is called *City Impact: How To Unify, Empower and Mobilize God's People To Transform Their Communities*. It really touched my heart, and convicted me. The power of churches working together! It tells of one city in Florida where churches did amazing things pooling their resources to address the needs of their large city.

*Here's the thing: When people who aren't Christians see the Body of Christ working together – for something beyond themselves – it gets their attention!*

*"The Pharisees took one look and threw up their hands: 'It's out of control. The world's in a stampede after Him'" (John 12:19).*

Our present world's not stampeding after Him. Maybe it never will be. Jesus said the road is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and few find it. But in our skeptical generation, more will believe when God's people are willing to deny ourselves and take up our cross – to reach beyond ourselves in humble, loving service, and to join hands in unity with other congregations to minister to the needs of people beyond the walls of our church buildings.

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.  
Community United Methodist Church  
April 10, 2022*

