

SERMON SUMMARY

Summary—ALL IN—Consumer or Follower

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and FOLLOW me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” Luke 9:23-24

Life is full of ALL IN moments. These are before and after moments that change and alter the trajectory of our lives. It is possible to wander through life skipping along—living on the surface, but the greatest depth and the most satisfaction in living comes when we take the step to move beyond playing it safe and move into the kind of life that chases after MORE—more LOVE—more FAITH—more FORGIVENESS—more DEPTH—more QUALITY—more MEANING—more PURPOSE. A life lived like that does not come without risk—where we come to the edge of what we KNOW—what we can CONTROL—what we can PLAN—and go ALL IN—jumping in with BOTH FEET—not LOOKING BACK—knowing that the FUTURE will be different from the PAST. Life is full of ALL IN moments—like love and marriage—starting a new job—learning you are about to be a parent—signing a mortgage—and moving to start something new.

History is replete with examples of these kinds of moments like—Columbus sailing of the edge of the map to discover America—the pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock—the Declaration of Independence—Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation—Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech—the launch of the Mercury rocket into space—these and many others are all examples of ALL IN moments that changed the trajectory and perhaps even the destiny of the human family.

For example, we were created for relationship with God and other people. Yet, each of us has experienced brokenness in our relationships. As Christians, we believe God knows how relationships work—he invented them—and when we strengthen our relationship with Jesus—he begins to redeem, restore and strengthen our relationships. He enables us to love, forgive, cherish, speak truth, be faithful, and carefully tend our relationships. It is one of the benefits of knowing Jesus. If we are teachable and will listen, Jesus can bring positive benefit to every aspect of our lives: our careers—our handling of finances—our capacity to love—our ability to forgive—the ability to live in peace with less anxiety—even the gift of intimacy and sex. All of these and more are gifts of God—and Jesus helps us discover God’s best for each of them.

Life is shaped by the ALL IN moments of our lives. Accepting Jesus as our Savior—giving as much of ourselves as we know to as much of Jesus as we can understand—is an ALL IN moment. When we do—we receive forgiveness, grace, mercy—a NEW life and the promise of life. It’s pretty cool. Soon we learn there are A LOT of benefits in being a Christian. God LOVES us and wants to HELP us—and when

we begin trusting Jesus, he brings BLESSING into our lives. Jesus came to REDEEM and RESTORE our lives—to help us see our broken world as God sees it—and mend it—taking what is ordinary and making it extraordinary—and what is less than God’s best to begin to get a glimpse of God’s best. Being a Christian has its BENEFITS.

In fact, if we are not careful, we could begin to think about being a Christian in terms of what we GET out of it—or what Jesus does FOR us. If this goes unexamined, we can reduce the gift of God’s offer of relationship with us to a “quid quo pro” transaction—an equal exchange of faith for benefit. However, Jesus came for MORE than what we often settle for. Eventually, FOLLOWING Jesus will be hard. It will cost us something. When we come to that place, we will know it, and our decision/response will say A LOT about what we think of Jesus. There are two possibilities: We will either be CONSUMERS of all the cool benefits we get for following after Jesus—or we will be FOLLOWERS because it costs us something to be identified with Jesus.

We all start out as CONSUMERS. We come to know Jesus as SAVIOR—receive forgiveness—begin to live a new life—which is better. As we begin to live a life of faith, our life—marriage—habits—intimacy all get better. It’s pretty cool being a Christian because of the blessings he brings into our lives. However, we eventually learn that while Jesus ACCEPTS and SAVES us AS WE ARE—giving us unconditional love and acceptance—Jesus also calls us to LIFE CHANGE which is not always easy. SALVATION is FREE—but DISCIPLESHIP is COSTLY. He not only wants to be our SAVIOR—he wants to be our LORD. Jesus did not come to make us CONSUMERS, but to engage us in FOLLOWING him in his mission to CHANGE the WORLD.

The transition from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER often comes at a crucial decision point. A before and after moment—when we come to the end of ourselves and figuratively jump in with both feet—making a definitive decision to go deeper, pray harder, trust more completely, give generously, and live sacrificially. This does not usually occur in a singular moment—but Jesus is continually call us to MORE. The deepest life change happens when we make the transition from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER. They unlock a whole new level of blessing in our lives—but are NOT EASY. I like to call those ALL IN moments—because they often COST us something. Following Jesus has a COST.

We see the journey from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER in the lives of the original followers of Jesus. In the Luke’s biography of Jesus, we see Jesus do some amazing things. He heals people—feeds 5,000—calms the sea—raises a little girl from the dead—casts out demons—and a host of others things. As he does, his popularity swells and the crowds grow. He is surrounded by CONSUMERS. They love Jesus for the stuff he does and the benefits of being a part of the crowd. He was surrounded by people who wanted to CONSUME the BENEFITS of being with Jesus. Luke 8:42 tells us the crowds were so large they almost crushed him.

Jesus is a rock star and the disciples are his posse, but Jesus knew what was coming—he is about to walk the way to the CROSS—his popularity will WANE—and the time would come when the same crowds that were chasing his BENEFITS would clamor for his DEATH. Jesus knew what it would require of him—but he also knew what it would require of his DISCIPLES. In Luke 9:23, Jesus is at the height of his popularity when he speaks about the cost of FOLLWING to those closest to him:

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily and FOLLOW me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.” Luke 9:23-24

It was an ALL IN moment—dividing CONSUMERS and FOLLOWERS—the next months would see the crowds of CONSUMERS shrink—while the FOLLOWERS walked the way of the cross with Jesus.

At first, it would appear to be a disaster, but Jesus knew what the FOLLOWERS did not—that MORE would be accomplished in his life, death and resurrection and eventual sending of his FOLLOWERS than was EVER going to be done through the crowd of CONSUMERS. God uses FOLLOWERS—people who are ALL IN—to CHANGE the WORLD. What Jesus WAS and IS looking for are people who are ALL IN. He is searching the world for people and churches who are willing to be ALL IN to FOLLWING him and engaging in his mission to CHANGE the WORLD. When it comes to Jesus—are you a FOLLOWER or a CONSUMER? Are you ALL IN?

This is an important question because as a congregation, we are launching into a six week initiative that we are calling ALL IN—during the last twelve months, our Church Board and Lead Staff have been engaged in a strategic planning process helping us define how we will reach our community and measure our success. We have revisited our congregation’s MISSION and VISION. For the last, ten years, our mission has been “to develop fully-devoted followers of Jesus Christ”—which is rooted in the Great Commission. We are simplifying that mission so that anyone can understand it. Our MISSION—we exist to CONNECT PEOPLE with JESUS—and make JESUS KNOWN.

We have also spent some time dreaming and prayerfully developing a vision of what Reynoldsburg UMC will look like ten years from now: Reynoldsburg UMC is a THRIVING HUB of LIFE in the COMMUNITY by WELCOMING ALL and REACHING, with excellence, those who DON’T KNOW JESUS. Grounded in BIBLE-based teaching, our members ACTIVELY ENGAGE together in SERVING, WORSHIP, and LEARNING on a regular basis. We exist to CONNECT PEOPLE of ALL GENERATIONS to JESUS and make JESUS KNOWN. To live in to that VISION will take ALL IN COMMITMENT from us.

To do this, will mean being intentional in DEEPENING the DISCIPLESHIP of our people. For far too long, we United Methodist have settled for making church members—but the future God is calling us to will

demand more and more DEEPLY COMMITTED FOLLOWERS of Jesus. So—we have also developed several goals and specific strategies/plans—which describe the ways that we will measure our success of DEEPENING DISCIPLESHIP during the next five years as we move forward on our ten year vision. These goals capture the ways we are going to deepen our discipleship, strengthen our witness, and hopefully, grow our church. STRATEGIES are being developed by our ministry leaders and staff, the GOALS are being monitored, and the leaders of these ministries are being held ACCOUNTABLE to reach them.

One of the GOALS is to increase SMALL GROUP participation to 50% of our total attendance over the next five years. We believe that it is impossible to really grow to our fullest potential without being in some form of intentional small group discipleship.

Another goal is to grow our ministry with CHILDREN and YOUTH by 35% over the next 5 years. While we believe that the primary spiritual nurture in the home should come from the parent, we also realize our responsibility to provide top quality, engaging programming for children and their parents.

Another goal is to increase our WORSHIP ATTENDANCE by 25% over the next five years. Each week we attempt to plan worship celebrations and messages that are worth our time and effort to attend. One of the mysteries that churches in America—including ours—are experiencing is not that less people are coming to worship—but that they are coming to worship less often. The average RUMC worshipper attends 1.8 times per month—of that would increase 1 more times a month—our attendance would double.

Another goal is to increase the participation of the MEN in our congregation to 50%. A church gets its spiritual depth from its women—but it gets its strength from its men.

Another goal is increase the GIVING of our congregation to include at least 80% of those who attend. We will be teaching and giving our people the opportunity to learn how to trust God and LIVE GENEROUSLY. We are working under the conviction that this is NOT about what the CHURCH WANTS or NEEDS FROM us—but what GOD WANTS to DO FOR, THROUGH and IN us. God wants to BLESS us as we learn to TRUST him and LIVE GENEROUSLY. This is an important goal because we presently have 50% of those who call this church their home who give nothing in a given year.

We will start by BUILDING and GROWING our PEOPLE—wherever they are. We want to make it impossible for folks to miss opportunities to grow and serve.

We have all kinds of people—longtime members and new guests—young and old—rich and poor—traditional and non-traditional families—single parents and widows—working class and management—black, brown and white—immigrants and long-term citizens—students and retirees—traditional and

contemporary—spiritual infants and spiritually mature—followers of Jesus and those who are seeking. We are intentionally BUILDING and GROWING our people—including YOU.

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS? Well, because we know and love Jesus—and Jesus has called us to know, love and serve the people he loves. He loves us—that’s for sure, but he also loves the 67% of the people in our community who do not know Jesus. Lost people matter to God—and they matter to us—however, lost people are only going to be attracted to Jesus when they see us FOLLOWING Jesus. Everything we are doing is intended to help us KNOW JESUS—and make Jesus KNOWN to other people. God has placed us here—surrounded by a changing community of people who DO NOT know Jesus—this is our primary mission field and we are going to claim it. What we are talking about will equip us to reach the 67%. WHY? Because we love Jesus and are called to love the people Jesus loves.

When we start talking about this kind of focus—it is common for some folks to begin saying, “What about me?” “What about us?” “Why are we doing this for them?” It is a part of our human nature to begin thinking in terms of “us” and “them,” but here is the really important thing we need to remember—in the Kingdom there is no “them.”

HOW? It will take ALL of us. We are after an ALL IN—100% participation from those who call Reynoldsburg UMC their church home. When we joined our church—we pledged to support it with our prayers—presence—gifts—service—and witness. We are working to align everything we do to move us to being a high-commitment, deep-discipleship, community-changing congregation of people CONNECTED to JESUS—and deeply committed to MAKING JESUS KNOWN to our community and world.

WHAT? All of these strategies—are intended to help us be in the position to build together for our future. We are BUILDING the KINGDOM here. BUILDING PEOPLE. BUILDING our mission and ministry in our COMMUNITY. There is something else we believe we are being called to build—some of us have been dreaming about this for 20 years or more—a FAMILY LIFE CENTER. The last time we were serious about a conversation like this was 10 years ago. Much has happened since then, but we believe the time is right.

For this to happen—it will take ALL of us—in fact, we are calling it ALL IN—because it will take ALL of US to the EDGE of ourselves—and STRETCH our FAITH. It will not be easy—but in the end it’s—an opportunity to take a GIANT step FORWARD in FAITH TOGETHER.

During this season, we are giving everyone who calls Reynoldsburg United Methodist Church their spiritual home the opportunity to decide to go ALL IN together with Jesus. Using all of the influence that I have in your lives, I am asking a favor of you: Commit to be here for the six weeks of this initiative. The heart of what God wants to do is not just THROUGH us—but also what God wants to do IN us. At the end of this ALL IN journey—the greatest success will be measured by if we as a community become

different through it—FOLLOWING Jesus—boldly WITNESSING—effectively PRAYING—bigger FAITH—selflessly SACRIFICING—and exhibiting an ALL IN COMMITMENT to living FAITHFULLY and GENEROUSLY.

April 2/3

Title: ALL IN—with JESUS

Text: Luke 9:23-27

Theme: We are inviting each other to take the step of being ALL IN with Jesus—to follow Jesus as Savior AND Lord—to be willing to ask Jesus “what’s next?” when it comes to FOLLOWING him—to take the next step—from SEEKER to BELIEVER—from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER. This decision is not essential to salvation, but it is consequential for anyone who wants to be a part of what God is trying to do in our world. The world will not be changed by CONSUMERS who are only in it for what’s in it for them—the world will only be changed by the grace of God and the lives of FOLLOWERS who are ALL IN for Jesus and his Church.

Summary: Exactly what does it mean for us to say we are a Christian? Most Christians can be placed in two categories. First, there are CONSUMERS of Jesus and the benefits he offers us in life. The Gospels are full of CONSUMERS—Jesus groupies who show up—experience the healing—receive the bread—watch the show—and listen to the teaching. But, when the Cross stood in the near future and discipleship became costly, the CONSUMERS were nowhere to be seen. CONSUMERS often confuse their admiration for devotion. They mistake their knowledge of Jesus for intimacy with Jesus. Knowing a great deal about Him, but not knowing Him personally. CONSUMERS assume their good intentions make up for their apathetic faith.

Is that how you define your relationship with Christ—CONSUMER—perhaps admiring and knowing a lot about Jesus—close enough to Jesus to get the convenience of all the benefits, but not so close as to make a SACRIFICE?

Second, there are also FOLLOWERS—people who SACRIFICE to follow Jesus. The relationship they share with Jesus affects and infects every area of their lives and priorities—and often causes them to live COURAGEOUSLY and SACRIFICIALLY in response to the grace they have received. They realize that if this present life what is most important to them, they will do everything they can to protect it, but FOLLOWING Jesus is most important to them, and often takes them to unsafe, unhealthy, and uncomfortable places. In the Gospels, Jesus was looking for COMPLETELY COMMITTED, FULLY-DEVOTED FOLLOWERS.

The Gospels record Jesus' definition of a follower—“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross daily, and FOLLOW me.” (Luke 9:23) FOLLOWERS imitate the life and obeying commands of Jesus—even if it means death—denying their selfish desires to use their time and money their own way and to choose their own direction in life without regard to Jesus. Following Jesus is COSTLY, but in the long run, FOLLOWERS believe it is worth the SACRIFICE.

So—are you a CONSUMER or a FOLLOWER? The problem with asking the question of ourselves is this—it is almost impossible to be objective. After all, if we say, “I am a follower”—what makes us so

sure? What are the measurements that we use to define our relationship with Jesus? Many CONSUMERS mistakenly identify themselves as FOLLOWERS by using cultural comparisons. We look at the commitment level of those around us and feel like our relationship with Jesus is solid—because we grade our relationship with Jesus on the curve—and assume that as long as we are more "spiritual" than the next person—everything is fine. That is why some fans are almost glad when the Christian family almost everyone admires has a child who rebels, or a marriage that is struggling to stay together, and isn't as perfect as they appeared—because in some warped form of logic—it means that the curve just got a little lower.

Have you ever noticed that we compare ourselves to others as a way to measure our relationship with Christ we almost always put ourselves up against those who are spiritually anemic—so that we look better? (Illus: JEG and Ken)

Another measurement CONSUMERS use is the religious yardstick—they point to their performance of religious rules and rituals as evidence that they measure up as real FOLLOWERS. After all—would a fan go to worship every weekend—put money in the offering—volunteer in the children's ministry—and listen exclusively to Christian radio? We reason—of course I am a FOLLOWER—I am not doing all that for nothing! We also use other false measurements to determine if we are FOLLOWERS—church membership—family heritage—Biblical knowledge—and many more. But none of those forms of measurement really matter—here is the real question—how does Jesus define what it means to FOLLOW him?

Jesus said, "FOLLOW ME" 20 times in the Gospels—and the verses surrounding those two simple words often describe the COST of discipleship—leave your former life—change your job—deny yourself—alter your priorities—take up a cross—sell all your possessions and give them to the poor—and FOLLOW—whenever—wherever—to do whatever Jesus calls us to do. **Truth:** salvation is FREE—it is a gift of grace which we can CONSUME—but discipleship is COSTLY—born out of the obedience of FOLLOWING. It is hard to follow—really hard.

This weekend, we are calling one another to take the HUGE step from knowing Jesus as SAVIOR to pursuing Jesus as LORD—from emergency PRAYERS to a LIFE of PRAYER—from SECURITY to SACRIFICE—from CONVENIENCE to COMMITMENT—from LIVING SELFISHLY to LIVING GENEROUSLY—from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER. We are inviting all of us to be ALL IN with Jesus. Will you give ALL of yourself—as much of yourself as you can understand—ALL IN—to Jesus?

Specials: Communion and ALL IN video

April 9/10

Title: ALL IN—as WITNESSES

Text: Acts 1:3-8

Theme: We are inviting each other to come to the edge of ourselves—and take the step of being ALL IN as a WITNESS for Jesus. The world witness in Greek is "marturous" which is translated martyr. This is

more than just being willing to give testimony for the benefits and blessings that Jesus gives us—it can involve being willing to die for his CAUSE. To be WITNESS/a martyr means that we are willing to die to ourselves in order that something grater might live in and through us. We are part of a community of faith that has 180 years of that kind of WITNESS—dying to our present comforts—and investing in those who will come after us.

Summary: In Acts 1, Jesus is speaking to his disciples to encourage them to be ALL IN. Jesus has just risen from the dead. He was really dead—and is now really alive. He has been hanging out with them for forty days since the resurrection, and the disciples were probably thinking, “Why would we EVER want to leave Jerusalem? Jesus is back. They even ask him about when is going to face “them”—those who oppressed them and had him killed—and restore “our” kingdom. They were comfortable—ready to get things back to normal with Jesus—the kingdom Jesus had talked about is back on track. Then Jesus tells them, “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” (1:8)

The disciples saw the Kingdom as only for them—and Jesus is about to change their frame of reference and tell them that the Kingdom—His Kingdom—is for EVERYONE. We tells them they are going to be his “witnesses.” A WITNESS is not just someone who shares courtroom testimony—the Greek word for “witness” is “marturios” which is the root word for martyr. A WITNESS is someone who is willing to die for a CAUSE. Jesus’ dream was to accomplish his mission to change the world through a community of people with a CAUSE—sharing what God was doing through them. The early disciples were willing to trade their lives for a CAUSE—it was not just about what God could do FOR them, but also about what God could do THROUGH them.

Jesus was commissioning them to change the world—give hope to the hurting—heal the sick—offer grace and forgiveness—show them life and offer eternal life. They would become the greatest force the world has ever known—a movement that would change cultures—birth democracy—start hospitals—establish schools—develop businesses—advocate for civil rights—they would be able to do this IF they would be willing to be his WITNESSES for the sake of a few personal benefits. FOLLOWERS rather than CONSUMERS. He was about to commission them to take up their CROSS.

The context is different, but the challenge remains the same for Christ FOLLOWERS today. We need to shift from being CONSUMERS to being FOLLOWERS. It is a call to be WITNESSES—who are willing to go ALL IN for the CAUSE of Jesus and his Church in our day and time. We are inviting each other to be a part of the next step of God’s dream and vision for our congregation. It is a dream and vision that the people called Methodist have pursued in and through this congregation for the last 180 years.

I will spend some time rehearsing our history and then state what God is calling us to be and do for the future—connecting our future vision with our past legacy.

This is an ALL IN moment for our community of faith—the latest in many over our 180 years history that builds us toward the future God holds for us. God has revealed a God-sized vision for our present congregation that will chart the course for the future. God wants ALL of us to be ALL IN.

Specials: Baptisms and ALL IN video

April 16/17

Title: ALL IN—in PRAYER

Text: Acts 1:12-14 (will also talk about Acts 2)

Theme: We are inviting each other to come to the edge of ourselves—to the place we are AFRAID—and take the step of being ALL IN in PRAYER. The early disciples did not cave into fear—they prayed and the result was amazing—the birth of the Christian movement. Facing and overcoming our fears—can be an incredible catalyst for the growth and development of faith—and moving us from being CONSUMERS of the benefits Jesus gives us—to being FOLLOWERS of Jesus and partner in his mission to CHANGE the world. Such growth is not always easy—but it results in the deepest and most authentic life change.

Summary: We are called to be “witnesses”—“marturous”—martyrs—to be willing to give our lives for a CAUSE—to be ALL IN. When we come face to face with an ALL IN moment—it can be pretty scary. In fact, we can become so crippled in our fear that we are unable to take the step God is calling us to take. However, the key to living the life of a FOLLOWER that God dreams for us to be able to overcome our FEARS—and step forward in faith.

Story: Felix Baumgardner—his 24 mile jumps from a balloon at the edge of space—hurling to the ground at 833mph—creating his own personal sonic boom—has been viewed over 500 million times on YouTube. In a recent CBS documentary, he was asked: “Were you scared?” He responded, “You wouldn’t be human if you were not afraid—but my biggest fear wasn’t the speed or the height—but the claustrophobia of being confined in that suit for the 7 hour ascent to the edge of space. I saw a therapist for 5 years to get over my fear of closed spaces.” He REFUSED to let his FEAR shape him.

There are key times in the life of being a Jesus FOLLOWER that we have to decide if we really are ALL IN. Are we simply CONSUMERS of the benefits Jesus offers us (making us better parents, spouses, friends—keeping us sober—helping us overcome anxiety and giving us peace)—or are we FOLLOWERS of Jesus? We are calling them ALL IN moments.

Often times, the one thing that stands between us and being ALL IN for Jesus is FEAR. The FEAR FACTOR is present in almost every ALL IN moment in life—first date—marriage proposal—first day at a new school or job—starting a new company, etc. FEAR must be confronted at every important stage in life—or we will never do or attain anything. The same is true when FOLLOWING Jesus. We have to decide—

are we going to cave into our fears and remain CONSUMERS—or overcome our fears and become FOLLOWERS?

The early disciples had to come face to face with their FEARS. In this weekend's passage, the disciples are huddled together in the Upper Room—gripped in FEAR. It was an ALL IN moment. Do you remember what they did to confront FEAR? They PRAYED. They remembered that WORRY is rooted in FEAR—it is a conversation we have with ourselves about impossible outcomes. But PRAYER is rooted in FAITH—it is a conversation with God about what only He is able to do.

How many of us PRAY more when we are SCARED? I want to affirm that action because it is the best answer we have in the face of FEAR's questions. PRAYER is the perfect reaction in the face of FEAR. Paul—a person who exemplifies the power of conversion and the impact of a life lived ALL IN for Jesus—teaches us this in Philippians 4:6—“Don't worry—PRAY.” Remember—WORRY is a conversation with ourselves about all the impossible outcomes—but PRAYER is a conversation with God about what only God is able to do.

What is it about being ALL IN that scares you? The uncertainty? The time? Losing control? What others think? The call to generosity? I want to invite you to wrestle with God in PRAYER about being ALL IN.

Jesus called them to be his “WITNESSES”—and they were AFRAID—so they PRAYED. The result was amazing. In Acts 2, Peter—an uneducated fisherman who had just recently been restored after denying Jesus three times—stood up to speak. There was a recent survey that revealed the three most common fears: #3—is snakes #2—is nuclear war. And the #1 most common fear is public speaking. Peter—a man with zero public speaking experience—OVERCOMES our most common fear and speaks (Acts 2:2-8, 12-14, and 36-41). Do you remember the result? 3,000 people accepted Jesus that day. (Story: Building the Worship Center—accelerated growth).

God's desire is to grow his Kingdom—and has chosen to do it through US. This is no different than has been experienced by every generation of our church for the last 180 years—a history marked with folks who faced their FEARS and stepped forward in FAITH. PRAYER was often the key. (Rehearse our history—affirming those who stepped out in faith in the past—and calling on the 30-40-and 50 years olds to step out in FAITH now.)

During the remainder of this initiative, I invite you to honest, ALL IN, sincere praying. Praying for others—pray for each other—pray for yourself—that God would take us to the edge of ourselves—where our ability ends and faith begins—that place of FEAR—and help us to overcome our FEAR with FAITH through PRAYER.

Specials: New Members and ALL IN video

April 23/24

Title: ALL IN—growing FAITH

Text: Acts 4:32-37

Theme: We are inviting each other to come to the edge of ourselves—to the place our abilities end—and to take the step of being ALL IN in FAITH. Barnabas was a man of deep faith. The gift he made in this text is not the most significant thing—because it is possible to make a gift—to meet the financial goals we have set—and miss the work that God wants to do in us. Barnabas' gift met a need, but it was about so much more—it revealed the faith he had in God. His faith marked his life and was continually revealed his character. He teaches us it is better to have a little faith in a BIG God—than to have a BIG faith in something other than God. That is the story of Ananias and Sapphira—which comes after his story—and it does not end well.

Summary: The early FOLLOWERS of Jesus had a transformational moment when they made the transition from being CONSUMERS to being FOLLOWERS of Jesus—when they realized it was not just about what they received FROM Jesus—but what God wanted to do THROUGH them for Jesus. They realized that such a step might COST them something.

Not much has changed in last 20 centuries. We get a lot from God. It is easy to concentrate on the benefits of faith—better marriages—improved parenting—increased peace and patience—sound financial advice—decreased anxiety—sobriety—and more. These are all things God wants to give us—but if we stop there—with the benefits—like CONSUMERS—we miss out on a lot that that God ultimately wants to do IN us and THROUGH us.

This story in Acts 4 can help us learn how to take the next step forward in FAITH. The context is that in the first few months of the Christian movement, the disciples shared everything they had—they were ALL IN for each other. This is not an example of communism or socialism—it is an example of extravagant generosity. It did not last long—which is human nature because some of the first world we learn are me and mine. (Illus: Joy at day care—defending her toys). As adults we wrestle with the same attitude—my house—my car—my 401K—my time—my life. In this story, we find a group of Jesus followers choosing to live generously for the community that they loved.

It is in this setting we are introduced to Joseph—but he is not remembered that way—he is remembered by his nickname—Barnabas—which means some of encouragement. He was a person of incredible FAITH. He would later live into the full meaning of his name—being generous in spirit to Saul—encouraging, befriending and advocating for him when no one else would—and taking the cause of John Marl when he disappointed Paul and he did not want to take him on their second missionary journey.

In this setting he sells a piece of property and gives the proceeds to the disciples so that they could use them as they saw fit. That type of GENEROUS LIVING is always coupled with the FAITH that is behind it. In this act, he trusts God to deliver security he no longer has. I would be really resistant and afraid to do that—but Barnabas—experiencing an ALL IN moment—exhibits a level of FAITH that would mark his legacy in life.

I believe we, as a congregation, are at an ALL IN moment. Every once in a while—sometimes once in a generation and other times only once in a lifetime, we get the opportunity to be a part of something BIG God is trying to use in the world—and when that happens, God invites us to go ALL IN—so that he can accomplish his mission to change the world. Such a moment takes FAITH. Illus: Rehearse the vision and root it into our history as a congregation. This is about more than what God wants to do THROUGH us—but also about what God wants to do IN us. God wants to build our FAITH.

Why shouldn't we be like Barnabas? If God is whispering that kind of ALL IN commitment to you—listen. However, remember this: It is possible for us to be people that give generously—meet all the financial goals—and launch this initiative—while missing the most important things God wants to do in our lives—and I do not want us to miss that. This initiative is NOT just about WHAT we are doing—what's MORE important is the WHY. Get this: the heart of what God wants to do is not just THROUGH us—but what God wants to do IN us. At the end of this ALL IN journey—the greatest success will be if we as a community have become different through it. BIGGER FAITH—MORE EFFECTIVE WITNESS—THAT'S the REAL PURPOSE.

Let's talk about this in terms of FAITH—and taking a step. Looking at Barnabas—I don't know if I have that much FAITH. We don't know how BIG his FAITH was—whether this was one of many or the only property he had. We do not know the size of his FAITH, but we do know if was CONNECTED with God. What are you CONNECTED to? We put FAITH in things all the time—the stock market—doctors—employers—people—pastors—ourselves, but a little faith in a BIG GOD is better than a BIG FAITH in something other than God.

Barnabas had a FAITH that was DEPLY ROOTED in his trust of God. Where is our FAITH ROOTED? Who/what is it ANCHORED to? Why does one have to give to show one's FAITH is anchored to God? Because the Bible consistently shows that they are connected—our greatest temptation is to put our faith in something else. That's why God calls us to give—to willingly/intentionally create a vacuum so that we have to put something different there. God calls us to give for the sake of our FAITH—to ANCHOR our lives in God—the source of our eternal security and hope.

I will be challenging our people to PRAY about giving the largest gift that have ever given during the next two years—but not for the sake of the initiative—but to GROW our FAITH and ANCHOR us to God. To have a little faith in our BIG GOD—rather than a BIG FAITH in something else.

Specials: ALL IN video

April 30/May 1

Title: ALL IN—in SACRIFICE

Text: Acts 6: 8-12; 7:54-58

Theme: We are inviting each other to come to the edge of ourselves—to the place where we need to totally need to trust that God is who he said he is and does what he promises he will do—and to take a step toward being ALL IN in SACRIFICE. SACRIFICE means to be willing to give us something WE love for something that GOD loves. The result of Stephen’s SACRIFICE was that the Church scattered—and the mission of the Church EXPLODED in the world. God is searching the world for FOLLOWERS and churches full of FOLLOWERS who are willing to go ALL IN so that he can pour out his Spirit and explode the Kingdom in the world.

Summary: SACRIFICE is the central message of almost every great story. We see it in movies—like William Wallace SACRIFICING his life for the freedom of Scotland in Braveheart—or Jack SACRIFICING his life for Rose in Titanic—or how Woody, Buzz Lightyear and the rest of the toys live SACRIFICIALLY to help each other in Toy Story. SACRIFICE is the central message of almost every great story—like the willingness of the God of the universe to SACRIFICE his one and only son for the redemption of the world. SACRIFICE is giving up something one loves for something one loves more. In spiritual terms, it means giving up something that we love for something that God loves more.

We are in the midst of this series in which we are asking the question: When it comes to Jesus—am I a CONSUMER or a FOLLOWER? The transition usually happened in a time of crisis—an ALL IN—before/after moment—that causes us to SACRIFICE something for the sake of others or the cause of Christ.

The story of Stephen in Acts 6 and 7 is a story of SACRIFICE for the cause of Christ. The context in which he is introduced is during a of conflict and controversy in the church. The Greek-speaking and the Hebrew-speaking Christians are arguing about the distribution of bread to widows (probably from some of the proceeds of the sale of Barnabas’ property). Big deal—because this was the only source of support for widows who had no property—no family—no standing and were totally dependent on the bread to survive. To help settle the dispute the disciples selected six Greek-speaking men including Stephen who is described as “full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” What a great reputation.

Only months removed from the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus—the Jesus movement is stirring up some stuff— and the Sanhedrin, Herod and Pilate were skittish about anything related to Jesus. The Jewish leaders acted to once again try to silence the Gospel. Stephen sees the opposition as an opportunity to communicate the Gospel—which was not received well. Luke 7:54-58 tells is the record of his stoning. He becomes the first “witness”—“marturous”—“martyr” for Jesus. He is the first one to testify for Jesus in such a way that is cost him his life. He was willing to give up something he LOVED—for something that God LOVED MORE.

You may be thinking—how is this a good thing? Yes Stephen died—but his SACRIFICE served to fulfill something else that Jesus said would happen—they scattered from Jerusalem—to Judea—Samaria—and to the ends of the earth. The mission of Jesus exploded. Stephen’s SACRIFICE was great, but through it, God launched the Church. It was a CATALYTIC EVENT.

SACRIFICE is always a part of every great story—and it is also always the PATHWAY to accomplish the mission of Jesus and spiritual renewal. Most of us will not be called upon to SACRIFICE our lives—it’s possible, but not likely. However, SACRIFICE becomes our story if we are ever to make the transition from CONSUMER to FOLLOWER. So—as we take this ALL IN journey together—it will embody SACRIFICE.

Let me challenge us to the SACRIFICE God may be calling us to. We can SACRIFICE in many ways—time—talent—energy and financially—but there are two things that God will call us to: 1) Something that God wants to do THROUGH us—cast vision rooted in our history. 2) Something that God wants to do IN us.

We are asking you to consider making a financial SACRIFICE that is the next right step for your faith. Financial SACRIFICE is discussed a lot in the Bible because there is a connection between our heart and our financial resources. Jesus discussed this several places, but made this distinct connection in Matthew 6:19-20: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” Jesus KNEW that our treasure reveals the posture of our HEART. If we want to know the condition of a person’s heart—watch where the money goes.

When we loosen our grip on our money—God loosens its grip on our lives. We tend to look to money for three things SATISFACTION—SECURITY—and SIGNIFICANCE—which ironically are the three roles that God wants to play in our lives. When we are willing to SACRIFICE—to let go—of the things that draw our hearts the most—God fills the void with himself. God is not interested in our money—he is interested in our heart and whether we are willing to SACRIFICE—and allow God to play the role he created in our hearts for him to play—and to fill the void only he can fill in our lives. It changes who we are. This is not just about what God wants to do THROUGH us—it is about what God wants to do IN us.

I will conclude by walking through various type of givers and challenging them to take an appropriate next step toward being ALL IN.

Specials: Communion and ALL IN video

May 7/8

Title: ALL IN—in COMMITMENT

Text: Acts 20:22-24

Theme: We are inviting each other to the edge of ourselves—to the place where we know that something will not happen unless God shows up—and taking a step toward being ALL IN in COMMITMENT. It was the fictional Maximus while addressing his legion the beginning moments of Gladiator who said, “What we do now echoes in eternity.” He spoke a truth that the human soul yearns for. We want to be a part of something that has eternal consequences. We want to be involved in something in which we are COMPELLED by the SPIRIT—something that we can’t not do. We want to be a part of something that is so consequential that it defines us as individuals, families, a congregation and community. When we come to that place, we will hear it from the Spirit and know that what we will do now will echo in eternity.

Summary: This is a HUGE weekend—perhaps the biggest in many of our lives of FOLLOWING after Jesus—because we are asking one another to make an ALL IN decision—which for many of us will move us from being CONSUMERS of the good things Jesus gives us in our lives—to being willing to make a COMMITMENT to FOLLOW Jesus at a COST. How can we tell the difference between a CONSUMER and a FOLLOWER? We can’t on the surface—we worship—we serve—we give—the difference is the COMMITMENT.

Paul is a person who embodies COMMITMENT in Acts. We first meet him in Acts 7—when he is known as Saul—and was seen holding the coats of those who stoned Steven. In Acts 8, we see him approving of the stoning and persecution of Christians. He is described as destroying the church—going from house to house and dragging those who followed Jesus for beatings and prison. In Acts 9, he has letters from the Sanhedrin giving him permission to go to Damascus to find followers of Jesus there and bring them back to Jerusalem for punishment and prison—and then he encounters the risen and living Jesus on the road to Damascus—and eventually becomes a FOLLOWER of Jesus. His life was a series of ALL IN moments—conversion—becoming a missionary and apologist for the Gospel—taking the Gospel to the Gentiles for the first time—advancing the Kingdom into Europe. He was constantly coming to the edge of himself—and trusting God as he took the next ALL IN step. He would become the second most significant figure in the Christian movement—our first and greatest missionary—and author of over half of the New Testament. It is hard to overestimate the impact of his life.

However, Acts 20:22-24 we get a glimpse into perhaps his most significant ALL IN moment of faith. When he says he was COMPELLED by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. It was not what he WANTED to do—as a CONSUMER—but what he was COMPELLED to do—as a FOLLOWER—even though he knew that the trip to Jerusalem would likely lead him to beating—imprisonment—trial and eventually death in Rome. He uses an interesting word in this passage, he says he is called to “testify” in the English. However, the Greek used for “testify” is the word “marturous”—or martyr—it is the same word Jesus used in Acts 1:8 as “witnesses.”

Truth: when we come to an ALL IN moment—we need to be sure we have heard from the Spirit. We need to be COMPELLED. Folks, this initiative is a significant step in FAITH for us. It is one that has been dreamed about—wrestled over in prayer—and planned for years. The life transformation that God is calling us to in our community is SIGNIFICANT, but it will not happen without ALL of us. I believe God is CALLING—COMPELLING—ALL of us to go ALL IN.

We sometimes don't see how what we do hear echoes of what happens in this world when God's people go ALL IN for him. What we do here echoes in eternity. Share a story.

During the last six weeks we have encouraged each other to go ALL IN for JESUS—as WITNESSES—in PRAYER—growing our FAITH—and making SACRIFICES. Today, we are asking each other to make a COMMITMENT—remembering that God does miraculous things THROUGH his people—and IN his people.

Story: From The Signature of Jesus by Brennan Manning—“I am part of the fellowship of the Unashamed...” That is a man who is COMPELLED to be ALL IN—and it INSPIRES me. We are on the brink of a movement that will define us as individuals—families—a church—and a community—and inspiration that will echo in eternity.

I will close by speaking to various groups—giving practical ways that they can take the next right step to being ALL IN—walking through the commitment card—giving instructions—inviting folks to give FROM their heart—and to give FOR the sake their heart.

Specials: Mother's Day, baptisms, ALL IN video, and ALL IN commitment