

**LIFE IN GOD'S KINGDOM IS ABOUT TRANSFORMATION:
A NEW WAY OF SEEING AND LIVING.**

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
September 7, 2025

Life in God's kingdom is about a rearrangement of priorities that opens us to ongoing transformation and a new way of seeing and a new way of living. The Gospel story begins with these words: "Now large crowds were traveling with him."

Who doesn't like a good show; whether it's a great Superbowl halftime show, topped off with a nailbiter finish in the last seconds of the game as your team kicks a winning field goal from 55 yards out, or a beautiful symphony. We all like a good performance. The people of Palestine weren't any different. However, life was simpler and much harder back then. Many in the rural communities where Jesus ministered would have had barely enough resources to feed their families. So, the hope was high of hearing from Jesus about a better life, or to at least have him provide a good distraction from the mundane struggle of day-to-day living. And Jesus was quite a distraction! He put on quite a show with his promise that the last would be first, and that tax collectors and prostitutes would get into the kingdom of God ahead of the religious leaders.

When Jesus was around, you would often encounter moments of suspense, not knowing what shocking thing he would do or say next, and what reaction he would garner from the religious and political and military authority. There would be the occasional gasp from the crowd, moments of desperation, adulation, miracles, and of course, a well-told story.

Yes, it's always good to experience a well-choreographed show. But this expectation can be problematic when it comes to spirituality and religious matters. The book of 2 Timothy refers to this when it says: "For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome

teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear.” Now, it’s always nice to pull in a crowd at church, creating a lot of positive energy. It can really feel good to the pastor’s ego. There can be the temptation to want to avoid stirring people up, to maybe soften the sharp edges of the scriptures just a bit.

There was a time in the 80’s and 90’s when many protestant churches focused the programming of their main event on Sundays on providing a show that would draw people in. But this road often ended up doing little more than tickling people’s ears. One pastor explained it this way:

“I came to vocational ministry in 1991. The Church Growth movement and “seeker-sensitive” churches were all the rage as I began my journey in obedience to God’s calling. I was young, inexperienced and on-fire for the Lord. All I wanted was to see people come to Jesus and see the Church grow. I didn’t know any better. I saw what the “big” churches were doing, so that’s what I tried to do...I embraced the “seeker-sensitive” model wholeheartedly.

“The “seeker-sensitive” church tries to reach out to the unsaved person by making the church experience as comfortable, inviting, and non-threatening as possible. The idea behind the concept is to get as many unsaved people through the door as possible, and to use nearly any means to accomplish that goal. [After all, w]e can’t have unsaved (or saved) people getting bored, so we need to use theatrics and popular music to keep their attention. Gotta’ have that state-of-the-art technology, lighting and great sound equipment if you’re going to do the job correctly.”

“A lot of churches became very large (and some very quickly) using the “seeker sensitive” model. One of the first was Willow Creek Church in Illinois.”

Yes, people do like a good show. But is that primarily what life in church is supposed to be about? As we just heard, Willowcreek Church was one of the first churches to embrace the “seeker sensitive” model of ministry. And they were also one of the first to begin seeing its problems.

The primary focus of the “seeker sensitive” model is to bring people in. And after they come in, it was assumed that that most would want to grow up spiritually. But this didn’t usually happen. The result was seen in the statistics that revealed that churches had become a mile wide, but only ten feet deep. While the “seeker sensitive” model had produced numerical growth, it did not produce spiritual growth and depth. And spiritual growth and depth is what our life in Jesus is meant to be about. The primary purpose of the church is not to bring more and more people into the building, but to minister to hurting people and to help them open their lives to the transforming work of God, so that they might desire to bring the love of God out into the world. And Willowcreek, and many churches like it, had ended up raising a lot of spiritual and religious consumers rather than disciples who would go about ushering in the Kingdom of God.

This challenge of focusing on consumers or disciples appears to have been front-and-center on Jesus’ heart and mind that day as large crowds were traveling with him. Many of those good faithful devout Jewish people were not interested in hearing about a new way of being or a new way of living. They were satisfied with having their ears tickled a bit. Not many were deeply committed to Jesus’ call to intimacy and oneness with God; to transforming their lives and to be about the work of ushering in the glorious reign of God. And so, Jesus stopped on the path, and turned to face the crowd, and said: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” His words must have sent shock waves through the

crowd as everyone must have been stunned into silence. Well! This was not the kind of show they had expected.

Now, what was Jesus doing by talking about hating one's parents and family members? Back then, all of life was centered on the family. Every individual's source of livelihood and community and love and support was found in the family, and nowhere else. They had no Pickleball club, or book club, or water aerobics group vying for supremacy in people's lives. The family was it. So, Jesus hit at the heart of the one source of community the people had ever known, and knocked it down a notch, supplanting it with membership in the Jesus movement, as the new people of the Way. In his shocking way, he was saying that being part of the Jesus movement, of being his disciple, must be top priority over everything else.

By the way, this "Jesus movement" wasn't some kind of code word "church" as we understand it today with its elaborate liturgy and well defined doctrine. They knew no such structure. They were simply an affiliation of passionate Jesus followers who were being transformed into the image of their Lord, and were spreading out, bringing Jesus' message of love to the world.

So, how does this relate to you and me, and our congregation, given the age of most of us? Isn't this message meant for a much younger crowd? Well, actually no. In the second reading this morning we hear the apostle Paul's words: "Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus." Paul was never too old to be about the work of God's kingdom. As long as his body allowed him, he was about God's work. Now, I know none of us will ever be another Paul, but the pattern of his life and ministry applies to each of us as well. Even though we may have entered retirement, we will never retire from being a disciple of Jesus, and the work of his ministry.

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