



January 5, 2014
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Our Call: IN
Acts 2: 37-47

Happy New Year! I hope you rang in 2014 with a bang. The Toones did... literally. We flew to Utah for a pheasant-hunting family reunion. Our flight attendant on the way down was hilarious, incidentally. During his safety briefing he said, "Place your own oxygen mask on yourself before assisting your child. And if you are one of those who is flying back to Salt Lake City with four kids... well, pick the one with the most potential and work down from there!"

A lot of life is about setting priorities... including our church life together. Chapel Hill has a mission statement that is probably familiar to most of you. "Working together to present everyone mature in Christ." That line comes from Paul's letter to the Colossians and the word "mature" actually means "destiny." Every single person here was created by God with a destiny in mind, and we consider it our mission to help each person discover and achieve their God-given destiny.

Which sounds noble but a little overwhelming. So we also talk about our "Call." And we have simplified that call into three parts that we hope will be memorable and helpful. Our call as a church is "Up, In and Out!" Last week Pastor Larry described these three parts as a "balanced diet," remember? And he started with "Up!" We are a community of worship. Our first priority as a church is to give glory to God.

One of the great challenges facing every human being is our self-absorption. We really do like to think that the world revolves around us. The best corrective for that is to put ourselves on our face before God and declare what is in fact true—You are God; we are not. You are the Creator; we are the created. You are the Savior; we need saving. You are worthy of our worship, and we offer it to you in every aspect of our lives. St. Augustine put it this way: "A Christian should be a hallelujah from head to toe!"

So, we are called, first, to be a community of worship. Up! We are also called to be a community of discipleship. IN! After we have turned our hearts and minds upwards in worship, we turn them inward as we learn what it means to be a disciple... a follower of Jesus. And we do that IN community...IN the church. That's what we are here for—to learn together how to follow Jesus! Our text for the morning is a description of the earliest disciples in Christian community. As you listen, ask yourself how we match up to this description of what it means to live our lives together IN Christ.

As I said, we had a great time on our hunting trip. But why do you think Cyndi's mom paid for her family to do this? Was she concerned that we weren't getting enough protein? That if we hauled a bag of frozen pheasants home, her grandchildren would be better nourished? I don't think so. Peggy wanted to bring her family together. She wants us to remember that we belong to each other.

When we come to the second part of our call as a church—IN—we arrive at something very precious: the gift of belonging. When we say that we are a Community of Discipleship, we are not just saying that we are disciples of Jesus Christ, although we are certainly that. Our common commitment to follow Christ is what brings us together. The fact is, this group of people would probably never gather for any other reason. We are too different. Some of you love the fact that I shoot birds. Some of you are horrified. Some of you love golf, and some think it is like watching paint dry. Just look around... we are so different. But because we belong to Jesus, that makes us family. We are called, as disciples of Jesus, IN... into community.

One of the greatest books ever written on the importance of Christian community was "Life Together" by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a pastor in Germany who refused to collaborate with the Nazis. He formed a secret seminary to train pastors and eventually participated in a plot to assassinate Hitler. He was found out and arrested and hung... just days before the end of the war. In "Life Together" Bonhoeffer speaks of the preciousness of Christian fellowship:

"It is by the grace of God that a congregation is permitted to gather visibly in this world to share God's Word and sacrament. Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick, the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in heathen lands stand alone. They know that visible fellowship is a blessing... The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. [But]...this unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day." (18-19)

On Christmas Eve we had over 3800 people in five services. It's a wonderful thing that so many in our community want to join us to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Most, I suspect, would describe themselves as Christians. Some visit from out of town, but that still leaves around 2000 folks who are not here the rest of the year. What do you think that means? Perhaps this: The majority of Gig Harborites, like a growing majority of Americans, do not believe they need the church in order to be Christian. Christian faith is simply a matter of individual belief: "Me and God... I don't really need the church. It's nice for important moments in life—weddings, baptisms, funerals... matching, hatching and dispatching—it's nice for celebrations like Christmas, but otherwise, I'm doing just fine on my own. I don't need this to have a relationship with the Big Guy."

Isn't that about right? The problem is: the Bible knows nothing of individualistic faith. Search from Genesis to Revelation and you will not find an example where God says, "I want you to follow me all by yourself. It's just you alone... with me." Never happens. In fact, the only part of God's creation that He declares not good is when man is found to be alone.

The more you look at the description of the early Christian community in Acts, the more you realize how integrated their lives were. You read nothing of Christian individualism. It is all about community... about the privilege and joy of being IN Christ together. In fact, I began to have fun as I read through this passage thinking of all the "in" words that describe that early community: INstructing, INterconnecting, INgesting, INterceding, INspiring, INvesting, INfluencing, INViting. Did you see those? Let's look again.

INstructing-42: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching"; Interconnecting, "...[they devoted themselves] to fellowship"; Ingesting, "[they devoted themselves] to the breaking of bread"... (Did you notice how important eating was? It's mentioned twice. Potlucks matter to Jesus!) INterceding: "[they devoted themselves to] prayer." On to 43, INspiring: "Everyone was filled with awe and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles." Verse 45, INvesting: "Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." Verse 47, INfluencing: "...they were enjoying the favor of all the people." Verses 41 & 47, INViting: "...about three thousand were added to their number that day... And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

I'm playing on the words here, but I you get my point. There was something precious and powerful about the inward focus of that first Christian community. When God calls his people into his Son Jesus, it is a community that learns and loves and eats and prays together. It is a community where the Spirit does amazing things that leave us gasping. It is a generous community of people that are less and less greedy and more and more invested in the work of the Kingdom. It is a community whose influence is felt by those around it; even those who don't believe in Jesus admit that something important and good is happening there. And it is a community that grows... because when those on the outside see what God is doing...see what a community of love and support and grace looks like as opposed to their community of competition and suspicion and judgment... they long for that. They want to be in.

How precious is it to you that you are IN the Church of Jesus? Jesse Hayes is a Chapel Hill family member who is confined to wheelchair. His battle with disease has been exhausting and discouraging. So we got the word out to Chapel Hill that Jesse could use a bit of Christmas encouragement. We asked, "would some of you consider sending him a Christmas card?" When Lance Brown went over to visit him after Christmas, he said, "Jesse, you look really strong and happy! How come?" Jesse smiled and typed out—because he cannot speak—"The love and joy

of my church family." He had received 430 cards. It changed his Christmas. Jesse is grateful that he is IN!

Maybe I'm just preaching to the choir. After all, you are sitting here. But I'll bet there are some here this morning who take for granted the preciousness of being IN this community of Jesus... who have forgotten how amazing it is to belong to a family that loves and cares for you... who have forgotten what it was like to discover a place where you can come, however broken and ashamed you might be, and find forgiveness and healing and hope and a future.

But I know one man hasn't forgotten it, because he just discovered it. Last Friday, I held him as he wept and confessed his brokenness and repented and cried out to Jesus to come into his life and forgive him. Friday, the Lord added one more to the number of those who were being saved. And today, my friend is here, beginning the process of discovering how wonderful it is to be IN the family of God.

And it begins the same way for all of us, just as it did in Acts: Baptism. Baptism is the sign that God has called us, God has convicted us, God has saved us, God has washed us and God has filled us. God did it back in Acts 2, and he is doing it right now, here at His church in Gig Harbor. Behind me you see a display of balloons. These aren't just the leftovers from New Years' Eve. These are a reminder of the way God is still at work in his church: 110 white balloons represent the total of new members at Chapel Hill in 2013; 37 gold balloons represent those who made first time commitments to Jesus at Chapel Hill in 2013; 61 green balloons represent those who were baptized at Chapel Hill in 2013 (a record number for us); and 27 red balloons represent those who went on to join the Church Triumphant. Our Jubilee year was a powerful reminder of what it means to live IN God's community of disciples.

This morning, as we celebrate the first Sunday of a New Year, is a wonderful opportunity to ask yourself, "Am I IN? Really? Am I all in? Am I experiencing the fullness of what God wants me to enjoy as part of His church family? Or am I just nibbling around the edges?" You heard the description of that early Church. Maybe one area jumped out at you; an area where God is prompting you to stretch. Last week we provided this guide for growth. It is available at our Connect Center. It asks you questions and suggests next steps forward. What next step IN can you take? Are you confused about what we believe? Try Christianity Explored. Lonely? Find a LifeGroup or come on Wednesdays to study Luke with new friends. Struggling in your marriage? Celebrate Marriage would be perfect for you. Want to be more generous but are buried under debt? Financial Peace University could set you free!

Or maybe, like the Acts Christians, you need to leverage your influence in the community for Jesus. Or you need to invite someone to the church for the first time. Or maybe you need to invite the Holy Spirit to fill you with a new sense of

awe and wonder at the privilege of being saved and called in Christ. How might the Lord be inviting you to be all IN as a part of his community in 2014?

On the first Sunday of the year, it is our tradition to renew our baptismal vows. If you have been baptized, we invite you come forward, recommit your life to Christ and be reminded how precious it is to belong to His Body, the Church. When you are ready, come forward. We will make the sign of the cross on your head and say, "Remember your baptism and be thankful." And I invite you to reply, "I am thankful...and I'm all in!" And if you have not been baptized and want to be, write your name down on a blue card and hand it to a pastor. We would be thrilled to schedule at time to meet with you and talk about what it means to be IN Christ and His Church.