

SERMON TITLE- "We Are a People"

TEXT- Matthew 4:18-22

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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Jesus' ministry began in dramatic fashion. He comes onto the scene when He meets, John the Baptist [His 2nd cousin] preaching and baptizing at the Jordan. Jesus comes to John to be baptized as well and as He does a dramatic event occurs-

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Matthew 3:17

That certainly got everyone's attention. After the baptism Jesus goes into the desert and is tempted for 40 days.

From there He begins preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

But He also does something else that is described in the following story-

As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men." At once they left their nets and followed him. Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. Matthew 4:18-22

For the next 3 years, the call "Follow Me!" would go out again and again and it had all kinds of different responses.

There were those who followed right to the end.

There were those who started and then quickly fell away.

There were those who decided that it wasn't for them.

But the call went out.

What, however, was it that Jesus was calling people for? At one level, those who began following didn't know and you could argue, didn't have to know. The very nature of following means that if you have confidence in the person who is leading-

you just go. Especially for the 3 years of Jesus preaching ministry, that was the case.

But already, even within that season, Jesus was explaining the goal of being His followers.

We are in a series of sermons looking at the question- "What Do We Believe?"

I began by trying to explain that it really matters that we know what we believe.

Next I explained that the foundation of our beliefs is the assumption that the Bible, as the Word of God, is our knowledge base.

Next we looked at the fact that even if we all agree that the Bible is God's Word- we still need to read it with the right set of glasses. Since that sermon I came up with a personal illustration of this. That illustration is my OED which requires a magnifying lens to read.

One of the critically important lenses through which we read the Bible is the lens of the Gospel.

And last we looked at the question- so what is the Gospel, the Good News? If that is a key to understanding the Bible then we need to understand that key.

The answer to that question leads directly to what we are looking at this week. Jesus came to earth with Good News- God has a whole new covenant to bring to people, a new relationship with God whose foundation is not just a legal code but communication- the kind of communication that takes place in healthy families.

But the question still remains- so we are following, where are we going? Most of us are familiar with the story of the Pied Piper who came to town with his flute and when he played his flute the selected group just followed him. Where does that story come from? I wonder if it doesn't come from the fact that throughout history all kinds of "pied pipers" have rolled into towns and have had people follow them away- often to miserable conclusions.

And people followed Jesus- in fact huge crowds. But Jesus was not just randomly leading people around- He had a very specific plan. It was a plan that links the Old and New Covenants.

From the very beginning, God's plan was to create community. The foundation of that community is the family and the first thing that God did after creating the first couple was set out the foundation of family.

One of the most beautiful verses in the Bible is-
A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families . . . Psalm 68:5-6

That was God's plan from the beginning and it carried on from that time forward.

We of course know that this was immediately frustrated as the first 2 siblings became the first murderer and victim. And from that ignoble beginning things carried on this tragic course.

But what becomes clear as you read the Bible is that God's plan is not just for simple little families- His plan is for communities. This too of course did not go on a course from strength to strength but communities quickly became dysfunctional.

But God's, plan of redemption, His covenants always focused on the restoration of healthy communities. The great flood wiped out all humanity and began again with a Godly man and his family. That did not solve the problem.

Then God called out Abraham and began again. This was to be a "people" who would live as the "people of God."

The whole story of the OT is the story of the "people of God" messing up and violating God's hope for them until at the end of it- they too ultimately cause the covenant to be broken.

And then God sends His Son, Jesus with a whole new "deal", a new relationship with Him that is reflected even in the words that God spoke when Jesus was baptized,

"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

Who wouldn't like to hear that? Who wouldn't agree that that kind of foundation is something that we all crave?

But that is the beginning and not the end. A family is not simply a relationship between a parent and child- it is a whole package of relationships between parents, children, siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins etc. At the end of the day- a family is the great clan that the Israelites became. It is just that God's family is to live by the values that God sets out as the family head.

In fact-

#1. Craving Family Defines What It Means To Be Human

This craving strikes to the core of what it means to be human. Janet and I are thinking about doing some home renovations and so we look at home decorating books. As I look at the pictures of the beautiful rooms I notice that they are often set up with a dream in mind- it is the dream of happy people, usually families gathered in visiting or eating. A breakfast nook is designed for a family to gather and have breakfast together in a beautiful setting.

The irony is- I suspect that most of these homes, so beautifully designed rarely have families gathering in these beautiful settings- they sit empty while the families are scattered around the world.

But even in the designs the craving shows up and it goes far beyond home design magazines. The beautifully designed family settings become tragically ironic.

The challenge, which is easily lost, is how do we actually get to the reality. A story that you often hear is that- when people look back on the really joyous family times- they actually were not connected to money or even health- in fact for many people their memories of when family times were really good often came in middle of crises.

It does of course begin with the relationship to the parents and any family model that does not do this cleanly will have cleaning up to do. It is why the Family of God begins with that first relationship.

But it is just as clear that if this relationship does not translate into good relationship into the rest of the rings of the family structure- things are not as they should be.

This leads to the key point-

#2. Jesus Came To Create A New Family- A People

Jesus came to earth to create a brand new family. This family is not built on the broken models we are so familiar with- this family is to be built from its foundations up- on the very character and essence of God Himself.

In the earthly sense, the closest physical imagery of God was the temple that He had the Israelites build. This of course was a mere shadow of the reality- but it still was a shadow of

something very special. As well, this temple ended up being demolished.

So when Jesus came to earth, He picked up the original language of both family and temple and used that to show those who were following Him- where this was leading.

Paul uses this language to describe the program-

For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." 2 Corinthians 6:16

This leads to a reminder that is repeated several times by both Paul and Peter-

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household . . . Ephesians 2:19

We are being assembled into a "people".

And this leads to a very important distinction-

#3. We Are A People- Not An Assembly

Any time a group of people gather- an assembly is formed. Assemblies are fun. Just go to a well-done concert or other event and you will pick up energy. If the event is exciting or entertaining- you have the ultimate human experience.

BUT it is very important to note that what Jesus came to bring to us was not an amazing assembly- He came to build a people.

Why is this an important distinction to stress? Because assemblies can easily appear like they actually are doing the job.

This is especially true of the challenge of the church. There are very few things as wonderful as a great worship service. It has everything that we humans need and want.

-an assembly of friendly, welcoming people with joyful attitudes

-great music

-an encouraging message

-there on a regular basis, when you need it

Those who do this well [and I think we should be among them] are able to attract huge crowds. There are churches around the world that rival any giant business. I typed "big churches" into Google and I came immediately to a Forbes

article on the giant churches in the US. The Forbes writer was impressed.

There is a product here that is more than even Bill Gates could come up with. It taps into the very essence of what it means to be human- and we are given a blueprint on who to do this.

BUT- creating giant assemblies is not the same as building a "people."

So what's the difference?

1. A People Have A Common Origin

The first distinction between an assembly and a people is that anyone can join an assembly- but to be a people you need a common origin. Anyone can go to a woman's event, a gathering of Japanese immigrants, the Greek days in Vancouver, or a Chinese restaurant but that does not make you part of the club. And if you think it does- you will soon find out that there is a barrier in your way.

God's people have a common origin and that is God and only God. That is the amazing thing about what Jesus came to create that it specifically excludes all the categories that naturally put in place. In language that is echoed all over the NT, Paul writes-

Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all. Colossians 3:11

All the normal categories that we put on "A People" specifically don't apply here. We have a common origin and that is, the origin of answering Jesus' call, "Follow Me!"

Those who say "Yes" to that call and begin the journey are called to be a people. That is our origin.

But you don't begin following someone without getting some ground rules- and if you start down this road- the code of the journey is also spelled out because-

2. A People Have A Common Ethic

Jesus spent a great deal of time explaining the code of this family-

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Colossians 3:12

We will not spend much time on this today- but the ethic that God set out for this people is not optional. The reality is that for all of us- the ethic stands as a reminder that we have a way to go. That is a good thing- not for the purpose of discouraging ourselves but of setting the non-negotiable target clearly before ourselves.

The next aspect of people vs assembly is-

3. A People Ride Through Storms Together

This may be the biggest contrast between an assembly and a people. Assemblies scatter as soon as the purpose of the assembly is done. Big assemblies require huge traffic flow planning. But at a less gracious level- assemblies require very little loyalty. Those who are in the sports business know that no one loves a loser. If you want the crowds to keep coming you had better put a winning product onto the field. It means that at any given point in time half of the world is winners and the other half losers [the NHL has come up with a unique formula to create more winners by their tie/point system].

This is bad news for all those of us who are going through a losing season- whatever that may be- crisis health, family crisis, or money crisis.

And it is not even that the immediate crisis is so tough- the problem is when the crisis drags on.

Our family is experiencing this already. It is one thing to deal with a crisis- it is another thing when that crisis becomes a way of life. Quickly a NT phrase became very meaningful to me-

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings . . . Philippians 3:10

As I talk to other people who have struggled with the journey of cancer I quickly recognize a fellowship that takes place among those who are on the same road- particularly when it is a difficult road. We understand something.

It reminds me, however, that if we only link up with those on exactly the same road- our world can become very narrow. Among a people- however there is a determination to ride through the storm together- and for the long haul.

To know that we are part of such a people- is an immense strength.

But there is one more thing- this people is not just about the hard times-

4. A People Celebrates Together

This is why the great assemblies do form so easily. We are a people, we have a common origin, we have run some tough races together- BUT we are built, not just for survival but because God loves His people, the world He created and everything within His order directs us to celebrate.

The Bible begins with creation- a beautiful world and the Bible ends with a new Creation being reestablished. We are between those two and things are not going well at many points in the journey- but one of the things God does promise those who take up the challenge of “follow Me” is joy.

That joy doesn't have to wait until Sunday morning- but my prayer is that some of that goes to you today.