

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 14/15, 2015
Rich Phenow
We Follow
Acts 2:42-47**

Nothing like jamming in church, huh? Lay down your troubles, your sorrows, your burdens, and come and follow Me. Amen? Let's go home. I always feel like, and you've heard me say this before, but we come to this point in the service when the preacher gets up to preach and it's almost like all the important things have been said. And yet, we get paid by the word, so . . . so I'm here to preach for an hour so get comfortable. Order out lunch and whatever it takes.

I just have a quick shout out. I have some special friends here this morning and these people came from Cape Town, South Africa to hear me preach this morning. Actually, they're coming over for lunch and we told them we wouldn't feed them if they didn't come and hear me preach because we didn't know if anybody was going to be here today, but in all truth and honesty, we have some special friends visiting us and they're from a ministry in Cape Town, South Africa called Africa Jam. Some of the board members are here this morning, but in a special way, I want to have Mousa and Christos stand up and we want to welcome you South Africa! Woo! These people are a couple of jammers for Jesus and I have to be honest with you, they're both gifted and talented; working with kids who are hopeless, in gangs and in tough places in these developments. They are gifted—beautiful voices, musically equipped—but most of all, they are people who follow and they are people who the Holy Spirit is alive in, and we're thankful for the kingdom work you're doing, so welcome.

Okay, some of you know that I just returned from sabbatical. Some of you didn't know I was gone. Some of you really don't care and some of you have never seen me before and wonder who's this loose cannon rolling on the deck of the Sanctuary. That would be me—Rich Phenow. And I just need to deal with something upfront right away. Um, I had a couple people come up to me and ask me what's on my chin. Seriously, I had one woman come up and say, "What's that?" And all I could think of is that it's the reincarnation of Harlan Sanders, that's Colonel Sanders you know, he looks like this. Anyway, when you have to explain your jokes you know you're having trouble. I said to her, "This is a soul patch. And it is cool." She said, "It's appalling. Shave that thing." I said to her, "Lynn, I'm so glad it bugs you. I'm going to keep it longer." Terrible to have a rebellious spirit, but anyways.

I want to thank you up front, just really quick. I want to thank you for sabbaticals. For giving us time to reflect, and renew, and to get away. I had a great sabbatical. I actually went on a long, silent retreat. I know you find that hard to believe, but I did. And I read some amazing books. This book is called *All In* by Mark Batterson and don't read it

unless you're ready to get in and jump in. And I had some really cool workshop experiences. I went to a workshop called "Spiritual and Psychological First Aid." Really good. And then I also had the opportunity to study, and I spent some time looking at grieving after trauma. Had some awesome vacation time with Jody and with our family. I just enjoyed the time and I want to thank you for it because you gave it to us. You give it to us and it's a very meaningful thing. I want to tell you just quickly, in ministry it's difficult because we never have a sense of completion. We don't feel like we get things done. We leave with a desk full of notes and Grady you know that. You've got messages and you've got emails and you go, wow! It never feels complete. Well, I actually painted the house. And that was just cool because I love to paint and it was very therapeutic and I pray and I think a lot when I paint. I painted the house and when I drive out of the driveway right now I'm going, "Wooo. I did that." I completed something so thank you for that gift.

Well, you know we've been working through our fall series about being the church. And we've been looking at the early church movement-the firing up of the beginning of the teaching of the disciples and many were coming to Christ. And I want us to just look quickly at the screens, or you can follow along in your pew Bibles. It's on page 1622. But I want us to look at Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' to their teachings and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled at awe with the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles and all the believers stayed together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. All the people. And daily the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. [Acts 2:42-47]

Unbelievable. People praising and enjoying God. Everyday. Giving and sharing things. Worshiping in ways like never before. And all because of Jesus. And all because of the story of Jesus. See, the power of the Holy Spirit was upon them. The very presence of God and it's being a witness through the work of the apostles; the same power that the apostles witnessed working in Jesus is working in them. Their lives are being transformed and changed from the inside out. And there's an attractiveness to the Church right now. There's an energy. There are new followers and they are filled with joy and gratitude and they're worshipping God like never before. And daily their numbers are growing. There are rescued souls; redeemed people changed by the story of Jesus. The message went from their heads and from their eyes, into their hearts. And suddenly, it's being lived out in community with one another. They're actually sharing their things with each other. They are addressing their needs. The Church is on fire. There's a momentum that's happening that's explainable. Not unexplainable; it's the

power of God, the Holy Spirit, the story of Jesus. I think that's supposed to be the condition of the Church today, not just 2,000 years ago. See, I think for me the Church has become just a spectacle. It's sitting in the crowd and waiting for something to happen. You know, we say that about 20% of the people are really engaged in the life of the church and in their faith, and about 80% of the folks are in the stands waiting for something to happen. And I hear some expressed feelings like the Church is irrelevant, outdated, the Church is stagnant, the Church is unattractive. And I hear folks say there's a lot of talk about Jesus in the Church, but there's little evidence of Him being lived out in their lives. Now, I don't believe that's the case of this church. I don't believe that's our personality. No, we are not a perfect church. We are a church that is run by people and people are imperfect. God is perfect. The truth of the matter is, we are doing our best to invite and inspire all generations to follow Jesus, love one another, and live that out in a missional way, but we are not perfect at it. But, there's evidence in this church of transformed lives, of people who have encountered the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now, I just wanted to look back real briefly in verse 41 right before these verses and what's happening here is that Peter is preaching. Peter says, "Save yourself from this corrupt generation". And those who heard Peter talking about Jesus accepted His message and about 3,000 were added to their number that day. I can't imagine preaching a sermon that even three come in one day, but Peter talks about Jesus and 3,000 sign up. Three thousand say yes! "I'm all in. I'm all in". Peter called them to turn around and repent from their sinful ways. He said, "Receive the sacrificial love and grace and the forgiveness offered in Jesus." Three thousand said they wanted to be rescued. They accepted the message and they began to get marked through baptism. Maybe some responded out of fear, maybe some responded out of a mob mentality, but a large number of people were deeply moved, and there was an awakening in them. There was an awakening because for the first time they received this redeeming grace and love from Jesus. They received the story of Jesus and then the outpouring of the power. Their eyes are opened, their hearts are changed, and they are forever moved.

The year was 1974. Three days after graduation from high school and don't do the math. I grabbed the proceeds from this remarkable accomplishment because some didn't think I'd make it through high school. I returned the gifts that weren't of great value to me for money, and I buy a backpack, sleeping bag, and a tent, and set out on an adventure with Tommy Lundeen. We didn't set out with a plane, or a train, or a bus, and we didn't even have our own automobile. We did something that was okay then . . . we hitchhiked over 5,000 miles out to California, up the coast to *Ventura highway where the summer breeze was blowing through the jasmine in my mind. Where the days were longer and the nights were stronger than moonshine.* Unbelievable experience. Stories someday I would love to tell you, but I want you to know what really happened for me on that trip. I was in Rocky Mountain National Park in Estes Park, Colorado on the side of the Colorado River. For the very first time in my life, I opened up my *Good News for Modern Man*, the prayer phrase of the New Testament, and I begin to read the Gospels; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I read them for the first time for myself; parts of them had been read to me by others and interpreted, but I never read the story of Jesus for myself. And I felt as I was reading as if things were falling from my eyes and from my

heart and I just engaged that story and read the Gospels and read them over and over on that journey.

See, I was raised in a home of faith. I went to a high school of faith, but for me it was all about obligations. It was all about right behavior. It was all about trying to win God's love for me. It was all about *doing* instead of just *being*. It was all about performance and accomplishing things. And that was mixed with messages in my family of origin that made me feel as though I wasn't good enough for God and even for others. See, I was a young guy who was filled with all kinds of shame, and all kinds of guilt, and all kinds of blame, and what that caused me to do was try harder and work at it more and I continued to feel as though I didn't measure up. Like nothing I could do could win God's love for me. I thought that my sins were notched in the hallways of heaven and that was the wallpaper that they were using up there. You know four lines with a cross and they were on all the walls. And I thought if my sins were moving in correlation of the hands of a clock, that probably my clock would be in the kitchen being used as a fan because I felt worthless. I felt like a bum. A scumbag. A sinner. I didn't want to feel that way, but that's the way I felt. But I read the stories of Jesus and I was blown away. I was blown away that Jesus ate with sinners. That Jesus actually broke religious rules. That Jesus hung out with a bunch of characters, derelicts, tax collectors, blue collared guys. That Jesus talked about loving those who are hard to love. He talked about a prostitute who washed His feet with her tears, and oil, and hair. He told stories—and these were my favorite—about lost sheep, and lost coins, and lost people. And I remember the tagline as if it were yesterday: And all that was lost, when it was found, heaven rejoiced in what was lost.

These stories impacted my life and I'm telling you I began to understand things that I had never understood before. There were stories about fishing and planting seeds and those were things that I loved doing. And there were stories about Jesus healing the mentally ill, and the physically challenged, and the lepers, and blind people. But what impacted me like no other was the first sermon of Jesus in Matthew 5, The Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes. Jesus says, the first thing out of His mouth is, blessed are broken, sinners, because I've come for you. And blessed are you if you're mourning or grieving about losses in your life. I'll bring healing there. Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth." He talked about the reality that if you're a peacemaker, then you're really blessed. And if you're a reconciler, you'll be blessed.

And I was amazed by that sermon. It just . . . it moved in me in ways that I can't even explain. It moved in me in such a way that for the first time I felt a call on me. The first time I felt like I was really being called by God to do something for Him in the world. I felt like I wanted to tell others about this redeeming love I had experienced. I wanted to tell them about the cross where Jesus took on our sins. I wanted to tell them about the empty tomb, and so I felt this call, and after I came back from that trip I actually went to college. Right away we started a fellowship group of us guys playing guitars and singing together on Sunday nights and eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And we launched this Holy Spirit movement on the campus, and before we knew it there were

350 coming, not to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, but it was about people believing in Jesus. It was a movement of the Holy Spirit.

Dallas Willard. I love reading much of his stuff and he's a great twentieth century theologian and he said this:

"When God himself came to earth, His redemptive name was Immanuel. Jesus was God with us. And when Jesus left, his promise was to send the Holy Spirit so that 'I am (that was the name for Jesus) would be with you to the end of the age.'"

See, Jesus sent us the same power, the same power that is firing up the early Church, The Acts 2 church, in such a way that followers are saying yes and they're giving everything they have, and they're enjoying God, and they're praising Him daily. See, it's God desiring to indwell in us. In Revelation, John says this:

"God's dwelling place is now among His people and He will dwell with them and be their God."

See, God desires that your life and my life would become His dwelling place. His desire is that we would become His companion, that we would be His friend, that we would be a follower. Now, I'm not suggesting to you that your story is reflective of mine because it's not. It's uniquely yours, but the liberating love and grace that I received for the first time was transformative in my life. But it's interesting to me that when Jesus calls the disciples—Andrew, Peter, and this tax guy—He says simply this,

"Follow Me. The invitation is to follow Me and if you follow Me, I will show you, come and see."

If you follow Me. And then what Jesus did is, He asked many to make their own decision to that invitation. Come and see. I'll show you if you follow Me.

See, this yes comes for us not with all the right answers, and not with all our doubts understood, but the following of Jesus can be in a slow and burning kind of a way. It can be a process over time, and for others it's a decision that's made at a specific time in a specific moment for a specific reason. Maybe it's the incredible joy of the birth of a child. For some, it's overcoming addiction. For some it's a movement of pain and loss of a loved one. It's the assurance that all of us have, that if we follow, the Holy Spirit will be at work in us. It's a coming out of the bleachers and it's a getting into the game, but it's not about us. It's about what's been done for us. See God doesn't call the qualified. He qualifies the called to follow. And for me, it's not just a one-time occurrence, but it's a daily devotion. It's saying every day, "I need the Holy Spirit to overtake my life and my faith to help me look a little more like Jesus today."

So the question I would ask you is simply, are you following? Are you in the bleachers? Do you need to say yes? Do you need to realize that it's not okay for us to be bored in

our faith? It's not okay for us to be spectators. God wants us to follow Him in a new way. He wants to pour into us His presence through the Holy Spirit today. Each of us. Some for the first and some for the hundredth time. Witness some of these stories of people who have done this very thing.

[Video shown]

Three stories—not about perfect people. And we didn't ask them to say the things they said. David (Hammond) and I just asked them if they were a follower of Jesus and how are they following Jesus? What are some of the ways and the places they are engaging a desire to know Jesus more? You know, it's really not a complicated question, but the question is, are you following Jesus? Are you just checking boxes and going through the motions and kind of coming to worship because somehow God's going to become happier with you? We need to worship God because we need to worship God. But the question is, are you following? Who are you following and whose are you?

Today in my prayer, I'm going to invite you just to consider following Jesus in a new way. To ask the Holy Spirit to enter into your life to awaken in you an even greater desire to follow Jesus for the first time or the hundredth or thousandth time. Let's pray together.

The question before us today, God, is do we know your son Jesus, do we know His story? And are we following that story and do we believe that story? And the question is are we just in the crowd waiting for something to happen? Are we just bored? Are we waiting for the Church to make mistakes and screw up? Gracious God I pray that you would open our hearts and our eyes to You. That You would pour in this power to worship You with joy and be in community with others. To see signs and wonders happening all around us. To serve in a sacrificial way; in a generous way. So in the silence of this moment, we would love to ask You to come into our lives and we love to say yes to You and to follow You. Thank you that it's not about what we've done or even what we do, it's about becoming followers of Yours. In Your holy name pour into us Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service <https://vimeo.com/145914449> | (We the Church, We Follow)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.