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**Trending: #churchmatters | John 20:19-22**

Well good morning! What a pleasure and a privilege it is to be here with all of you this morning, worshipping and glorifying God together. I'm so thankful that you are indeed part of this ECO movement of almost 400 churches and church plants across the United States. I'm thankful for that, but I'm also particularly thankful for the way in which your congregation helped begin and continues to help fuel this movement going forward in ways that you may not totally realize. As John mentioned, it was six years ago that we gathered together to hear and to see and to consider this vision that might we be a new kind of denomination. And I remember listening to John and a few others be able to present this vision where we would not just be a safe harbor, a safe theological denomination, but rather because of the safety of Jesus, because of the clarity of our theology, we could be bold for the kingdom of God. And you helped to begin this movement. John continues to be influential; you continue to be a model congregation that impacts others throughout the country. I'm thankful for John's voice in the denomination and also in my life personally.

So it's great to be here, great to join with you in this series on trending to look at a trend that many of us are noticing around America, which is the trend of people away from Christianity, church, and denomination. I remember teaching my son, who is now almost thirteen, that *here is the church, here is the steeple*...and he could never get the fingers right. And I remember him going *here is the church, here is the steeple, open the door*...and he would say, "Where are all the people? Where did the people go?" And that's what a lot of us are asking in our culture—where are the people going? And so I want to begin today by reading a passage that helps us understand that as we begin to watch our culture shift and to change and to move away from Jesus and church and Christianity and denomination, that while this can be troubling and disconcerting, it also opens up for us an opportunity to reclaim the biblical Christ call on our lives and our church as we engage in the world around us. So our passage today is John 20:19-22.

<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." <sup>22</sup> And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

As we look around at our culture, in May of 2015 there was an article written titled "America's Changing Religious Landscape" and the hashtag, the tweet, the line that rose out of this particular article was "The rise of the nones." There were some statistics associated with this "Rise of the nones." Now notice it's not nones N-U-N-S. It wasn't a

paper about the rise of the Catholic order of the nuns, but the rise of those who were not religiously affiliated. And the researchers had thought that this was going to be the case, that there would be a trend towards the nones, but the extent to which it occurred surprised even them—that in a seven year period, an additional 7% of the U.S. population said that they were now religiously unaffiliated; fifty percent more people than had said this seven years earlier. Where this got lost was in mainline denominations, evangelical churches, and Catholic churches; those were trending down while the nones was trending up.

If we look at this trend generationally, we see some very distinct generational trends about who is involved in church and who isn't involved in church. We see that those who are in the builder generation, those born prior to 1943, 74% of them regularly attend church. As that generation begins to move into the church triumphant, the generation of the millennials that is emerging into adulthood—we see only 17% of them are actively involved in the church—less than a quarter of their grandparents. And even those who claim the faith of Christianity are finding church less relevant, less necessary. There is a book published by David Kinnaman and George Barna called “Churchless” where the authors discuss this increasing population of churchless—those who claim the name of Jesus, who would have an orthodox faith, but just not think of church as something relevant for their life. I was talking to my spin teacher this week—I'll let that image sink into your mind for a minute; don't knock it till you've tried it...it's a great workout—I was talking to her, I went to school with her brother, she's older than her brother. Her brother is a pastor, her father was a pastor...and I was talking to her a little bit about her life. She would absolutely affirm the core of the Christian faith, but what she said is, “Well, we're empty nesters now and so we are taking a break from organized religion.” That's the trend—why go to church? And even among those who go to church, less and less are going to denominational churches. We see that actually in 2001 a shift began to happen. Those who weren't Catholic, those who were Protestant, more began to go to non-denominational churches than denominational ones. The influence of Presbyterianism in our culture has decreased significantly. In 1965 there were 4.25 million people who were Presbyterian in the United States. The population was a little under 200 million, and so we represented a little over 2% of the population. Now the overall number has dropped in half, but of course the population has increased, so we are about 2/3 of 1% as far as Presbyterians nationwide of any stripe. Now personally I could care less if people are Presbyterian or Methodist or Lutheran or non-denominational, but it is showing the decrease of our impact in the culture. And even when I did a little statistical study of the area of Edina—we kind of looked and asked *what's going on right around you, right in your own neighborhood*—you also see this trend of the rise of the religiously unaffiliated and the decrease of those who would call themselves Presbyterian or Reformed.

This is a trend that is occurring. It is a trend that has people worried and concerned and fearful. But it is also a trend that opens up a new opportunity of hope. A new opportunity of hope for believers, for churches, to be able to reclaim an authentic Christianity as we engage in the world around us. Because here's the reality about what happens when the church moves from the mainstream to the margins. When Christianity has moved

from the mainstream to the margins, it has a better chance of becoming a movement. When Christianity moves from the mainstream, the center of culture and society, into the margins of society—whether that is just cast to the side or under persecution—it has a better chance of becoming an exponential movement of a greater quantity of people coming to know Jesus Christ, a greater quantity of disciples, numbers of disciples and quality of disciples, as well as the impact that we can have on the church around us. See, we're used to Christianity being in the mainstream. Some of you remember the 1950s, what we often call the heyday of Christianity...if you weren't Catholic or you weren't Jewish, you were Protestant. And the question wasn't, "Do you go to church?" it was, "Where do you go to church?" *I assume you go, I assume you're part of some worshipping congregation.* What is that? Times are changing and shifting. Christianity is no longer the mainstream of the culture.

I remember teaching a Bible study at the first church I pastored, and we were talking about faith and politics—which is always fun...and you know, no problems there—and I remember this woman saying to me, "Well, I think that being a Christian and being an American are really the same thing." And I'm like, "Uggggggh." You can be both, absolutely. Of course. But they aren't synonymous. See, when Christianity was in the mainstream, it was actually beneficial for people to go to church—you could make business contacts, it was the socially acceptable thing to do, it was actually better for you and your career and your comfort and your stability to go along with society and be part of church. But when Christianity moves to the margins, it begins to be costly; it begins to be uncomfortable. But it divorces itself from a cultural Christianity that sometimes truncates the true and radical gospel of Jesus Christ. And so if the trend is that less people are coming to church, than we need to reverse that trend by trending toward missional. See the trend is always for us normally to be attractational—we want to attract people to us. We have nice buildings—in your case absolutely gorgeous buildings—we have good staff and good programs and good websites and good ministries that are going on and all of these kinds of activities where we try to draw people to us, hoping that they just want to find a church and if we can present that kind of church, they will want to come to us. And that's good, and that's helpful, and we still need to do that. But instead of just trying to draw people to us, we need to push our people into the world. One pastor said it like this, "Maybe the amount of energy we spend getting community people into church should be matched by the energy we spend getting church people into the community." Amen? We want to move our people into the world, and we want to do this—the word missional, it is trendy, it is popular, there are 700 books that have the word missional in the title—because more than trendy, it is biblical and it's actually going back to the biblical call that God has put on our lives. And we see that in the passage we just read. We see Jesus, who is coming to the disciples, and they are in the room and they are afraid; they're fearful of the Jews. The door is locked and through the locked door, through the closed walls, here comes Jesus. And He says to them, "As the Father sent me, so I send you." That's always been the call of Jesus—we are the sent people of God into the world. We see that in the Great Commission, right? Jesus doesn't say *stay and make disciples of all nations*. He says, "Go. Go make disciples of all nations." As you are going, as you are going about the life that God has called you to, make disciples of all nations. Jesus calls His

disciples and He says *follow me and I will make you fish for people*. You know, if I want to fish I can have the best rod, I can have the best hook, I can have the best bait, but if I cast my line in the living room of my home it's not going to do any good, is it? I gotta go to where the fish are. I gotta get in the boat, I gotta go on the sea, I gotta go on the lake, or as you all do ten months of the year, I gotta cut a hole in the ice, right?

We have to be sent. And Jesus tells us not only do we need to be sent, but He tells us the way we have to be sent. Jesus shows up to the disciples and what does He do? He shows them His hands; He shows them the wound in His side. It's not even a scar yet, it's not even healed—it's a wound. And Jesus says to the disciples, "Just as the Father sent me, so I am sending you", showing them the visible reminders and markers of what it means to be the sent people of God. How was Jesus sent into the world? Jesus was sent into the world in the very beginning in the incarnation that we celebrate on Christmas, where He became flesh, and He dwelt among us. Where was He born? Was He born in the best hospital in a private room? Was He born at home with at least a qualified Doula present? Was He born in a hotel? No, He was born in a barn. A nasty, filthy barn where animals eat and sleep and drink and do their business. That's where the God of the world dwelt among us—in the messiness. And when Jesus did His ministry, He did it in the messiness, didn't He?

I was listening to some of your past sermons on the Block Party, and the people that show up at the party, the people that Jesus invites to the party aren't the people that we invite to the country club, are they? It's messy. It's awkward. And it's painful. Jesus came into the world in the messiness; He left the world because of the world's cruelty. Yes, by the Father's desire, but nonetheless He left because of the world's cruelty. And so for us, if we're going to be the sent people of God, we have to be willing to engage in the messiness. If we don't have some messiness on us; if we don't have some wounds, some pain, some uncomfortability as a result of following Jesus, dare I say we might not actually be doing it right. And that's when the church flourishes.

A little over a year ago I was with some Iranian house church leaders. We were not in Iran, we were in another city and I was watching a training that was going on for them. Many of them had had their houses taken away, they had been imprisoned, they had lost their jobs, and they were getting trained to go back. And I'm thinking *why in the world are you going back? Why would you want to be there?* And they said *because God is at work. And it's painful and it's uncomfortable, but God is doing a mighty work here in Iran.* And by many, many studies, Iran is now the fastest growing church in the world. It's all underground, but it's because faithful people are willing to get messy and get dirty. And here's the great news: that kind of faith, that kind of Christianity, that kind of call as a disciple, that's what the millennial generation wants. They want a faith that isn't tame, that isn't truncated. They're saying *hey, if we're going to go to church, we don't want to just play church. If we're going to follow Jesus, we're going to follow Jesus. I mean, we're going to take it. We want to have a cause, a person to follow.* Follow Jesus. Follow Jesus. And that means as churches, we're going to have to be willing to encourage our younger people, encourage our leaders who are coming up, even when they are moving in some places that are uncomfortable. It means we are

going to have to be willing to plant churches because the number of cultures and subcultures are radically changing around us. So we are going to have to help equip and send people into different kind of contexts for the sake of the gospel. And it's going to be costly, because we don't want to send people out, we want more people here. But that's a movement that has a multiplying effect in the world.

And so the question I'm asking you, and quite frankly, I'm asking myself too is this: Are we willing to change the trend? I see people who wring their hands and shake their head as they look at where culture is going... *woe is me. Can't we just bring back the fifties?* So we can do that, and we can complain and bemoan the statistics, or we can change the trend, and we can be God's people sent out into the world to see His impact. And I say this to me because I live in Santa Barbara, the second most never-churched city in the nation. And I travel a lot—after I finish this trip I'm going to have over 100,000 miles so far this year—and when I get home I just want to be with my family. I don't want to engage my neighbors, I don't want to engage in messiness, but that's what God needs...not because He needs me, but because my community needs Jesus. And I want us to do this not out of guilt or shame or all of that kind of stuff, but to model the one who gave his life for us, who—as we celebrate in Communion—came into the world, took on our flesh to live the life that we should have lived, that He strived for us to live but we could never live, and to die the death that we rightly deserved.

Will you pray with me?

Gracious and loving God, I thank You for being willing to give up your position in heaven to come and to dwell among us. Not in a fancy palace, not with crowns of gold, but rather Lord, to be born in a stable and to be crowned with thorns because You desired to save this world. And so Lord, I pray for all of us as we think of the context that You have placed us in—in our neighborhoods, in our schools, in our community organizations, in our civic activities—wherever it is Lord, help us to be the hands and feet of Christ. To be willing to be messy. Not to avoid the mess, but to jump in because that's where You are already at work. We thank You and praise You in the strong and powerful name of Jesus. Amen.

*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.*