

## **John 2:13-22**

<sup>13</sup>The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. <sup>14</sup>In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. <sup>15</sup>Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. <sup>16</sup>He told those who were selling the doves, “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” <sup>17</sup>His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” <sup>18</sup>The Jews then said to him, “What sign can you show us for doing this?” <sup>19</sup>Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” <sup>20</sup>The Jews then said, “This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?” <sup>21</sup>But he was speaking of the temple of his

body. <sup>22</sup>After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Lately, I have been really bothered by something. It is re-emphasized every Sunday and now every Wednesday when I travel to visit other churches. That is - the aging of the population of people who actually attend church. Not necessarily those who are “members”, but those who show up. If something doesn’t change, many of these small, rural churches I visit, including Bethel, will be closed within my lifetime.

Let me repeat that: If something doesn’t change, many of these small, rural churches I visit, including Bethel, will be closed within my lifetime... and possibly well before that.

I have made it a mission that in 2024, evangelism and stewardship - or more plainly spoken - increasing the number of people who attend Bethel - will garner a lot of my attention. If this congregation isn't going to grow and gain new members, especially younger members, we will no longer exist. It is as plain and simple as that - the cold, hard truth.

I have watched my mother-in-law's small, rural church dwindle away during the time she has been the pastor there. When she began preaching, about 20 years ago, she had Sunday school and confirmation. She had about 50 worshipers every Sunday - more in the Summer when the resorts were full. Now, she has 8 people left. She has been facing the difficult decision of what to do. Does she stay open for those 8? She, herself, has not taken a salary in over 5 years. The offering just doesn't support it. They can barely keep the heat and lights on. One parishioner had

left a large sum of money when she passed away, and the church has been using that to stay open for many years now. But even that account is running dry.

In the end, it doesn't matter how much money a church has in the bank. It doesn't matter how good our services are or how well received some of my sermons might be. It matters nothing how beautiful the quilts are or how lovely the music is. If people don't come, there is no church. If those of you who are here now pass away, who will be left in your pew?

In Palisade alone, the school, the Mercantile, the Co-Op and many other places from the past, sit empty or with a new purpose. The town and its vibrancy is slowly being dimmed. I can't think of a sadder fate than to project 20

years into the future and see this beautiful church sitting in a similar position.

So what are we to do? It isn't just Palisade or my Mother-in-law's church. This is happening to every small church in America. Even the large churches are shrinking.

Churches are closing at rapid numbers in the US as congregations dwindle and a younger generation of Americans abandon Christianity altogether. The situation means some hard decisions for pastors, who have to decide when a dwindling congregation is no longer sustainable.

About 4,500 Protestant churches closed in 2019, and that was before the pandemic took its toll on hundreds of other

churches, who never re-opened, or opened with significantly less people.

I read an article from US New and World Report from July 2023. The article states, “In 2017 Lifeway surveyed young adults aged between 18 and 22 who had attended church regularly, for at least a year during high school. The firm found that seven out of 10 had stopped attending church regularly. *The younger generation just doesn't feel like they're being accepted in a church environment or some of their choices aren't being accepted.* Some of the reasons were “logistical”, such as people moving away for college or starting jobs which made it difficult to attend church. But some of the other answers are not so much logistics. One of the top answers was church members seem to be judgmental or hypocritical and therefore, the younger generation just doesn't feel like they're being

accepted in a church environment or some of their choices aren't being accepted by those at church. About a quarter of the young adults who dropped out of church said they disagreed with their church's stance on political and social issues.”

The article goes on to say, “Closures are often due to a failure of churches to adapt. A church will go through a life cycle. At some point, maybe the congregation ages out, maybe they stop reaching young families. If the church ages and doesn't reach young people, or the demographics change and they don't figure out how to reach the new demographic, that church ends up closing. Yes, there's financial pressures that will close a church, but oftentimes, it's more that they didn't figure out how to change when the community changed, or they didn't have

enough young people to continue the congregation for the next generation.”

Forty million Americans have stopped attending church in the past 25 years. This change is also bad news for America as a whole: It has been studied through PEW research and Harvard Health, along with their other studies, that participation in a religious community *generally* correlates with better health outcomes and longer life, higher financial generosity, and more stable families—all of which are desperately needed in a nation with rising rates of loneliness, mental illness, and alcohol and drug dependency.

The study states, “Our results showed that religiosity was significantly and positively related to satisfaction with life and overall health. That is, people with a higher level of religiosity were more satisfied with their lives and



reported better health. Religiosity appeared to contribute directly to overall health. In summary, the results of this study are consistent with our hypotheses of religiosity as a significant predictor of health and well-being through both direct and indirect mechanisms. These findings, along with the evidence from many other regions of the world show a beneficial relationship between religion and health.” This might be a bit over the heads of many, but Karen says the total effect correlation coefficient is high enough to suggest a moderate to significant correlation between having strong religious beliefs and overall happiness and better health ...as if that cleared it up!

Today’s gospel should bring us much better news than what I just shared. This gospel is a call to authentic worship. Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem - a place that was supposed to be the reflection of God’s abundance

and joy—to be a light for the nations. Instead, Jesus found the Temple full of greedy merchants who exploited the weak to make a profit. He was surrounded by people who had forgotten God’s words of Law and Promise. Jesus knew that the Temple had to be cleansed if it would ever be able to reflect God’s light to the world. And through His cleansing of the temple, Jesus calls us to authentic worship, free from the distractions of worldly pursuits and materialism.

True worship is not confined to physical structures or rituals but involves a sincere heart devoted to honoring God in spirit and truth. The cleansing of the temple by Jesus challenges us to examine our own hearts and attitudes towards worship. Are we wholeheartedly devoted to honoring God in our lives, or have we allowed worldly concerns and distractions to corrupt our worship?

Now, despite the unpleasant facts that I presented in the beginning of this sermon, I want to state that being a Christian does not mean being a church-goer. But, authentic relationships with fellow believers enhances every part of our walk with Christ.

The Bible does not explicitly state that it is okay to believe in God but not attend church. However, the Bible does emphasize the importance of fellowship, worship, and community among believers. Here are a few verses that highlight the significance of gathering together with other believers:

Hebrews 10:25 (NIV): "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Acts 2:42 (NIV): "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

Ephesians 4:11-12 (NIV): "So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."

1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV): "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

These verses underscore the importance of gathering together with other believers for worship, mutual encouragement, spiritual growth, and the building up of the body of Christ. While individual belief in God is essential, the Bible also emphasizes the communal aspect

of faith and the significance of participating in a local church community.

I can promise you that I am not keeping tabs, wondering why you don't attend service on a Sunday. I am, however, happy when I get to see you! I will readily admit that I often used to attend "The Church of the open water" as I used to call it. In other words, I would forgo church in order to go out fishing on a Sunday morning. After all, I worked all week, did chores all Saturday, and found that Sunday morning was one of the only times I could find to go fishing. And when the walleyes were biting, I didn't want to miss the action! But, upon returning to church, one lady would always say to us, "We sure haven't seen *you* in a while!" - to which I felt shame.

I don't want people to feel *obligated* to be here. I want them to *want* to be here.

When Jesus turned His disciples into Apostle's by sending them out to preach His words in His absence, He was growing the church. If we have any hope of being able to continue to worship together in this beautiful place named Bethel, meaning House of God, we must do the same. We must take that step to invite someone to come to church with us. We must step out of our comfort zones. We must be welcoming, accepting of any and all people who would choose to walk through those doors. It is not our place to judge choices and like lifestyles. Jesus didn't only invite the people He knew or the people who were like Him. He invited everyone. It is time to not look just at ourselves and our ability to be here, but rather, look at the invitation Jesus sent in this gospel today: He has invited us to

believe in this temple - the house of worship where we can come together and learn and grow with each other. But, no matter what happens, He has also invited us to believe that He is the true temple, who can never be destroyed.

Think about 15 years from now. Where will Bethel be if we don't grow the church now?

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, Time is running out for many of your followers. It is urgent that we act as you have commanded us to do - as the hands and feet of your Son. Those of us who are here know that He is the true temple. But there are so many more who could hear this message. Equip us with the tools we need to make a difference. In His name we pray, Amen.