

The Big Comfy Church

Good morning, I have to admit that I am a little nervous about this morning as usually I am speaking to a group of youth or kids, which is a little less intimidating to me than a sanctuary full of adults, and most of the sermons I have ever given were either in Portuguese while I was in Brasil, so if it was bad I could blame it on the language barrier, Or in India where I preached through a translator, so really they could have been preaching their own sermon. But this is good for me to be stretched and pushed out of my comfort zone a bit; which actually fits in very nicely to what we are going to talk about this morning.

So to start off I will put your curious minds at ease and address the issue of this couch up here. So what is important to you in a couch?

Kevin and I were very blessed to receive money for a new couch as a wedding gift. So in December we did a lot of couch testing and the main thing to us was that it was big and comfy and that we could hang out together and with friends in our living room. We tried out a lot of couches before we found the one we liked; one that we sink into and relax and watch a TV show or movie on. It is wonderful!

So what comes to mind when I say sitting on the couch watching a movie? popcorn, a blanket, maybe a pillow... right. And who has ever forgotten to get something to drink, and you really don't feel like getting up because you just got all comfy and cozy? I for one definitely have. And usually I look around to see if there is anyone else there to get it for me. But this can be problematic, because as soon as I ask someone to get a drink for me then I have to ask them if they want to watch the movie with me, and I have to share my couch and my popcorn... Then they start talking during the movie... I, for one, do not like it. All I want is to watch my movie and eat my popcorn, so I create rules like no talking, you sit on that side of the couch, you get your own blanket, and the biggest thing for me is if there are chips, I can't stand the sound of the crinkling chip bag, so chips have to go in a bowl. Does any of this sound familiar to any of you? I'm sure it does. So what has happened? Because we are so focused on what we want, and have set up rules for everyone else so that our desires are met we have completely lost sight of the purpose of the couch.

This is very similar to what the North American church has become. We have lost sight of the purpose or mission of the church because we have become distracted by what our wants and needs are in the church. We get distracted by who we want to share our couch with and who we do not. We have set up rules and even have kept traditions that because they are comfortable and we like it. *We have become what I like to call...church potatoes!* – I am not saying that all traditions are bad, and that we should cut them out.

What I am saying is that we need to be cautious with them, by asking ourselves is this tradition, is this rule or regulation working towards furthering the kingdom of God. Is it reaching out to our community and world, or is it something nice and comfortable that hinders us? These are difficult questions to ask, and answer for sure! We also get distracted from the purpose of the church by large issues, such as same sex marriages and abortion. Though we all have our opinions on these, I am not opening this up to a debate, but to simply state that we can be

consumed by these, though important as they are, we lose track of the people hidden behind them.

Romans 3:23-24 says “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” That being said, it is not our place to judge one another on our sins and struggles in life; as we have ALL sinned. We are to be a community that holds each other accountable, but that is completely different than judging. Who here has ever been judged? It is not our place to judge one another, God is the ultimate Judge. But it is also through the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross, that we are saved! His love for us is never ending, a love that we can never know the depth of. It is this love that the church is called to. It is this love that needs to be our focus in our community, in our town, in our country and world!

As was read earlier, in James chapter 2 verses 8-13 “If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “*Love your neighbor as yourself*,”^[a] you are doing right.⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.¹¹ For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,”^[b] also said, “You shall not murder.”^[c] If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

¹² Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,¹³ because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

This section can be a bit overwhelming, as we just spoke about how we ALL have sinned, meaning we are all law breakers, we have all been judged. And I’m sure we have all experienced at least once in our lives. It is definitely easier to judge than to be judged, and to point the finger at someone else. I believe that this is one of the biggest down falls to the church. Though we may think we are doing good by pointing out other people’s faults, like premarital sex, going out to bars and getting drunk, cheating on a spouse, even pointing out that someone is a liar. If they are not Christian, they are not living by the same values as us and we cannot judge them for living a life against our values. That judgment is up to our Heavenly father. But if we show mercy to each other, knowing that we are all human, we all make mistakes, we all have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, it becomes easier to love one another. It is through this love, through us living out our faith through love for them, that people see a difference. It is through this that we can witness. Not through condemning words or judgmental actions. As James states right at the end of verse 13, “mercy triumphs over judgment”. I am going to state that one more time, Mercy triumphs over judgment.

As the church, as the body of Christ it is with this attitude we are to live. We should not be judging who comes into the church. We should be welcoming them with open arms no matter what their background is or what is going on in their lives or even what clothes they are wearing. Our mission as the church is to love, and through this love, through Christ’s love, lives are challenged and changed. This is not to say that it is only the life of a complete stranger who walks through the door of St. Andrews off the street (which in actuality is not very likely) is the one whose life is challenged and changed. It is each and every one of our lives, we ALL sin, we all need the mercy and grace, forgiveness and love of Christ.

This is not an easy task by any means. I have struggles, I battle anxiety and depression, I don't necessarily struggle as much with judging other people, though definitely have, I struggle more with judging myself; with not allowing the mercy and grace of God reign in me. But that is my battle and my sin. We all have something. My prayer for this church, and it has been for a while now is that we can be an open SAFE community. Where we don't hide our struggles, where we can openly ask for help without the fear of being judged. That St. Andrews is a place of love and encouragement, where "Mercy triumphs over judgment"!

It is through this, through this love of each other, that we can become a missional church. Before we can reach out to the surrounding community and world we need to be a community of love and support for each other. I know that sounds harsh, and I want to just say that I love St. Andrews and it is a church that is different than most that I have gone to, and I have seen and felt this love. But it needs to be more upfront. It needs to be on an everyday basis. It can't just come from Kerry and Jan and Kevin, it needs to come from each and every one of us to the rest of us. I want to challenge us, and push us further because I don't want to see us stuck on the couch. I know that we can do better. I know for a fact that there are many struggling and hurting families in this church. I know for a fact that there are many lonely people in this church. I know that there are people struggling with huge life decisions, I know people are struggling with illness, themselves or in other people. I know people are grieving, and that people are struggling with their faith and searching for more. There are many burdens in this church that need to be lifted and it is the mission of the church to look after and care for one another. We are family with the best dad in the world! And yes there may be conflict in families but because we are called to love each other, we are called to forgive. We may have differences and that is ok, we are still called to love each other. God has not chosen who to love and who not to, His love covers all. It may be very difficult to love someone you may not necessarily like, but with the help of Jesus we can. This love is our mission.

My dream is that this church is not stuck on the couch, but is a wooden chair. I know it sounds funny so I will ask you this. What, to you, is the purpose of a wooden chair?

The purpose of a chair is to give us rest off our feet. It is usually something that is used around the dinner table, or in classrooms. It is used in community with others. The church is a place that we come to be refilled and renewed. We are taught, we are fed the Word of God. BUT it doesn't end there.

The church is called to be a witness to the world. I know we have all probably read it a million times but I want us to revisit the great commission.

Matthew 28:16- 20

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

And just to refresh this a bit for us, I will also read it out of the message,

¹⁶⁻¹⁷Meanwhile, the eleven disciples were on their way to Galilee, headed for the mountain Jesus had set for their reunion. The moment they saw him they worshiped him. Some, though, held back, not sure about worship, about risking themselves totally.

¹⁸⁻²⁰Jesus, undeterred, went right ahead and gave his charge: "God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age."

Jesus did not say, go make buildings and sit there every Sunday, refusing to smile, and leave that place week after week and complain about how the teaching was not on the topic you wanted to hear, and how the music was not the type that you like. I exaggerate!

No what he said was go out. In the North American church we usually understand this as sending missionaries out around the world. And yes that is a need. But we need to remember that we live in a missions field.

Here in the Cowichan Valley, there is so much need! People are searching for what is missing in their lives, but they are finding every other thing possible to fill the void. It takes humility and courage to go out into your own home town. But that is what we are called to. It is not just the few people the church supports as missionaries around the world. But the Church itself that is called to go out!

I would like to bring you back to the wooden chair in closing. My prayer and my challenge to all of you, to St. Andrews is that we do not become church potatoes, comfortable on our couches. It is that we put our hearts and energy into loving one another, that we are a community that can come together, be fed together, support one another, show compassion, mercy and grace to one another, so that we are rested and restored. Through this we become empowered to go out after church each Sunday, get up off of our chairs, and be the beacon of light in the dark world, spread the love of Christ in our work places, in our families, and even just the random encounters walking down the street so people see that we are different.

I have a cool story about this. Just after I graduated from high school I went on an 8.5 month long program with Canadian Baptist Ministries. We spent one month in Toronto training, 6 months overseas, and then a month and a half debriefing and on deputation, visiting all the churches that had supported us. My prayer from the beginning, knowing that it was going to take time to learn Portuguese, was that I could show God's love to Brasil through my eyes. I know that sounds funny. But I wanted God to shine through my eyes, so that even when we didn't understand what each other were saying, or even when I said nothing and just passed someone on the street, God would shine through my eyes, to spread His love. I was actually a little surprised to know that it had happened. I found this out in a really cool way. Half way through our program, we all had mentors, and they came to visit us in Brasil and see what we had been doing, and then we all traveled to Bolivia, where the other 2 teams on the program were. At the end of the mentors retreat, we took the time for each of us to sit on a chair in the

middle of the circle. We then went around the big circle and encouraged who ever was in the middle. I am still struggling with accepting compliments and encouragement, so it was tough. But as people were going around it came to one lady, I can't remember her name she was a mentor of one of the girls on the Bolivia team, but this is all I can really remember of the evening. She said, Melanie I love the way I can see God's love in your eyes, it shines bright. At first it didn't really click, but a few minutes after I realized that I had never told anyone that that was my prayer. It was through this circle of encouragement that God affirmed the answer to my prayer. It is one of my most memorable answers to prayer. And, ya, I couldn't speak the language very well at that point, I was still learning the culture and making mistakes constantly but God used me, He used the very simple thing of the way I looked at people to show His love. And that is exciting! He can use anyone anywhere!

I like how James concludes chapter 2 with the story of Rahab. Verses 25 and 26, "In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?²⁶ As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

God can use anyone in any situation. We need to live out our faith. No one said it was going to be easy when you chose to follow God. When God called the disciples, it was not easy, for them they had to drop everything on the spot, leave their families and follow this man they didn't even know. That is huge! They were persecuted because they believed and did as he commissioned them too; they went out and made disciples... So where are our disciples? Who are we reaching out to? I am going to make it personal, who are you reaching out to? How are you reaching out? Are you reaching out? Being a Christian means living your faith, so what are you doing to live out your faith? Are you walking the walk or just talking the talk? I'm sorry for being blunt, but I know personally I need a kick in the pants every once in a while. So I challenge you to reflect on your life and on your faith.

My prayer for you; that God will fill you all with courage, as you go out because it isn't easy, but we have God on our side and He will use you in ways you never even imagined if you open yourself up to Him. We will see the results, maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not even in the next few weeks or months, but they will come. God will use you and us, and St. Andrews will become that light in the community. But it is up to you! It is your choice; will you be a church potato comfortable on your couch? Or will you be sitting on your chair in community being filled up before going out and spreading the love of Jesus Christ our Lord?

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