

In

What a good thing it is to have friends! About a week after I last preached, I was having lunch with a friend who had been in church that day. He said, "Tell me more about the theme of your sermon," and I gave him the 15-second "elevator speech" of the theme. He thought for a moment and said, "Huh ... I never got any of that." Now, this friend is a VERY smart guy, so I have to assume the lack of clarity was my fault, so for this go-around, I will tell you my desire for what I'd like to communicate as a *theme*, *homework* and *take-away goal* for our time together today.

Theme:

God invites each of us to **join** in the process of reconciling love ... right here, right now. This invitation is for today, tomorrow and all the days of our lives. The act of **joining** in this process makes each of us part of a group. **Whenever** we say "yes" to joining God and **whatever** way we say "yes" to joining God, we are "in." There is no probationary period. There is no admission test. We only have to say "yes" and we are "in." In one sentence:

With trust in Christ's authority, God's wisdom and love live in our hearts and transform the ways we think and act in the world, individually and in community with others.

Preamble to Homework:

Being "in" God's process of reconciling love is like joining in with a crowd (we are NOT talking about joining as in "joining the church" specifically, although that is one way to do it, and a great way for 114 of us). The overarching "in crowd" we are talking about is *God's* crowd, and everyone is invited to join; if they join, then they are part of the same "in crowd" as is every other person who has said "yes." Forget about denominations or even religious categories for now. Joining in the process of God's reconciling love changes us. If we are not changing, go back to joining again ... as many times as it takes.

Homework:

Make a list of all the "in crowds" to which you belong. Usually each crowd has a "responsibility" component and a "benefit" component. Over the next week, pay attention to responsibility and benefit for your activities in each crowd.

For example, for me, I will list a few of my “in crowds.” I am part of ...

Kipp Family
Fuller Seminary Student
Corona del Mar Community Church Member
Port Street Resident
United States Citizen

After you’ve made your list, at the end of the next week, take a few moments to reflect on the week’s activities and make a note of the ways God might be working in your life through these “in crowd” activities.

It seems to me that when we are in church and talking about God (and/or Jesus and the Holy Spirit), it is easy to get lost in religious and spiritual language that runs the risk of making the reality of God’s presence *less* accessible. Of course, that is never the goal for anyone, but it is the reality sometimes. This type of language use is often called “Christianese,” and I think it deserves some attention to make sure we can translate or decode the language when talking about our experiences. I read a blog entitled, “Learning to Speak Like a Christian: 40 Examples of Christianese.” They included phrases like “Ask Jesus into your heart” and “Lord, we just pray that ...” with “just” being the operative word inserted frequently in public prayer. We don’t usually say very many phrases like that around here, but we have our own versions and, if you are part of this church, they mean something and are important for our awareness and orientation.

I am NOT commenting on Christianese or specific shorthand language derisively, as it has great meaning and power to many. But I am commenting on having an awareness of the assumptive quality that often accompanies its use, and I am also calling us to reflect on how we would translate such words and concepts to others.

Some examples of our “in crowd” language in this church: **Disciple Bands**, which is what we call our Small Group Bible Studies. **Vocatio**, which is the word we use to reflect God’s call for our lives. **Covenant**, which is what we call our annual written declaration of our desire to be a member of the church, and which may include our intention for participation in the life of the church organizationally and financially. There are others, but you get the point. Do we all have a clear enough

understanding of our “in crowd” language, and are we able to explain it to others who are not yet members of this church?

Why bother with all of this? My reason is that I sense some wonderful things happening in our community and I would like us to be prepared to receive these wonderful things. One of my “in crowds” that is a huge part of my life is being a member of this church. When I did my list, I did not put my “major crowd” at the top, which is a two-fold crowd. I am #1) a Child of God and #2) a Citizen of God’s Kingdom here and now *and* not yet here and fulfilled. How’s that for Christianese? That means something powerful and true to me. I can explain it, but it would take longer than we have today. Being part of these two groups leads me to responsibility and benefit, just like we talked about before. The “responsibility” part of this for me is that I am called to see everyone else as a child of God and to see everyone else as a citizen of God’s Kingdom as well. The benefit for me is what the writer of Ephesians (Paul?) calls “the bonds of peace” in “unity which the Spirit gives.”

The actions I take on a daily basis either build up being part of these crowds or work against being part of them. Sometimes it is both at the same time. That is why I need others to be in community and that is why I need the Spirit’s guidance in prayer.

I want to share a few stories about folks in our congregation and talk just a bit about the ways God is working in their lives that, unless you knew them well and could talk to them and with them on a deep level, you might NEVER come away thinking that the things happening in their lives had anything to do with God’s presence and love. But *they* think that and they know it, even as Paul wrote: *“With deep roots and firm foundations may you, in company with all God’s people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may you be filled with the very fullness of God.”*

(BTW, I have permission to share these stories.)

A New Way #1:

One friend tells about a recent occurrence in her marriage for something that is pretty insignificant from one vantage point and extremely profound from another. This woman has attended Prayer 101 and several retreats, is in a Disciple Band, attends worship regularly and is committed to study, reflection and active prayer. She and her husband got into what we might call a “tiff.” Pretty small and petty,

but in the past these kinds of tiffs could result in days of discomfort and awkwardness, with neither of them very willing or able to apologize. She left the scene of the tiff and spent a few minutes in prayer. She went back to her husband and said, “How about on the count of three, we both say ‘sorry’? One, two, three ...” “SORRY,” they both said and laughed and moved on. *Is that a big deal? You might think so if it were you.*

A New Way #2:

Another friend shared that he has been investing more time and energy on structural changes in his business. He is intuitive by nature. In his church life, he has attended Prayer 101 a few times, is in a Disciple Band and attends worship regularly. He recently had consultative conversations regarding his intuition and dreams and, through these conversations, is paying more attention to them. He realized that some major changes needed to occur in his business, but he had been letting others talk him out of his ideas with “rational” and “factual” discussions. Without detail in our discussion this morning, he recently made some decisions completely counter to any rational or factual line of thought and implemented what was coming to him at three o’clock in the morning. The changes have already had significant results and his employees are happier and more productive as well. *Is that a big deal? You might think so if it were you.*

Teamwork and Partnership:

I have been a member of this congregation for 22 years, serving on various boards and committees, participating in most of our fellowship activities and being part of small groups, Bible studies and Disciple Bands. As a seminary student, one of my educational requirements is to serve in an apprenticeship role in a local church or nonprofit group. So starting at the beginning of 2017, I became an “Intern Pastor” here, joining “staff” of the church. Jonathan Gamble has the same requirement and we share “office space” in classroom 3 (Jr. High Room). Our Youth Minister Kathy Kipp is in the office two doors away. As I was preparing for our July 2nd worship service, I felt compelled to share a song of a call for revival and I had a strong sense that Jonathan, Kathy and I were supposed to do that together. So the three of us led the congregation in singing “Breathe on Us Again” as a Call To Worship and Invocation that day. On Monday, the three of us were reflecting on this and decided we needed to have weekly meetings called “Upstairs Staff” and since that time we have been meeting weekly. I am so

appreciative to be part of this church's "in crowd" and for all of our wonderful staff members. And as part of that team, it has been amazing so far to see how the Spirit is working in our "Upstairs Staff" gatherings. There are already some wonderful things bubbling out of those meetings and I'm sure you will all hear more about this in the future, but what I want to share with you is the sense of camaraderie and teamwork and partnership that continues to grow and build as we work together.

And then ... wouldn't you know it, there is "confirmation" for the things we already know. There are many tools available to discern personality traits and identity markers, and hopefully I can communicate this without getting too esoteric or being too obtuse. One marker of identity we looked at has 360 possibilities listed on a continuum. That is, the marker for each person can be seen in a value between 0 and 360. For Jonathan, Kathy and me, this marker lands on 28 for each of us. It reflects what we value and appreciate in regards to our responsibilities, hard work and career. Are you kidding me? All three of us with the same marker? All three of us aligned in value and intention and purpose? Where are the probability statisticians in the congregation? For me, this observation is just another wonderful confirmation that God has a plan and intention and somehow finds a way to help align all of our lives to a plan and purpose beyond what I could come up with. *Is that a big deal? You might think so if it were you.*

As we heard in our scripture reading this morning: *"Now to him who is able through the power which is at work among us to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation for evermore!"*

Those are three short vignettes of the ways God is working in a marriage, in a business and in a church. God is always active, but I think the connective link in these three stories is our own active participation and saying "yes" to joining God's "in crowd." Our intention and focus is the key to discerning our responsibility and is the key to unlock the benefit of being a part of God's crowd.

Are there others who are coming to join our crowd? I think so and I sense this is already at work. We have a Prayer 101 retreat in September and there are quite a few mid-twenty to early thirty-somethings who have expressed interest in attending. All of them are crazy busy. Perhaps none of them will end up attending, but they

have all expressed interest. None of them are members of this church, but as we talked about earlier, all are part of God's "in crowd" if they say they are. It would greatly please me if all of these young adults attended Prayer 101 and all of them ended up joining this church. It would please me because I want them to experience life with us and I want to experience life with them, and the best way I know how to do it ... the best "in crowd" I can think of ... is being part of God's crowd (generally) and being part of this faith family (specifically). In my mind that carries no pressure or assumption that it will happen that way, but it is a hope and a desire that I hold and I would love to see it come to pass. I think others want to know that they are wanted and valued and appreciated and that we *want* to share life with them.

We will also have new relationships developing with the launch of Sea Star Village Preschool in the fall. Will we be ready to receive young parents if they get interested in the church as part of their own path searching for an "in crowd" of meaning?

In the past month, we have had several social gatherings, which allowed for unhurried gathering times of presence. We launched film showings called "**Reel Time**" and had an outdoor film night on the patio and a Sunday matinee film showing in the Library. The films were the topic of discussion at gatherings Jonathan created called "**Pub Theology**," where we gather on Sunday afternoons at the "Side Door" at Five Crowns. At these events, we had congregation members and several others with no affiliation with this church but who are part of the big "in crowd" we talked about before ... God's "in crowd." Will they ever be part of this church as one of their "in crowds"? For me, I hope so, but I also have no expectation or feel any pressure that this needs to happen. I just know how wonderful and valuable and special it is to be part of this faith family and I want others to know that also, and I want to invite them to be part of this "in crowd" as one of their "in crowds." This church is not for *everyone*. I get that. But it is for *anyone* who wants to be part of it and wants to join in community as it is being expressed here and now in this small beacon of light called Corona del Mar Community Church.

May our "in crowd" be a reflection of God's "in crowd" and may we remain ever open to new life, new energy and new people being sent to join us so that all of us "may be filled with the very fullness of God." Amen.