



The Rev. Alan Sutherland, Rector

August 23, 2009

Pentecost 12 2009

Each service that is held here at st Johns is recorded in our service register. What day, time, which service, who officiated and preached and how many people attended is all recorded. At the end of the year all those numbers are totaled and that gives us the yearly attendance and the averages at each service. We live in a time when numbers seem to be important and reflect success and unfortunately it seems that the church is no exception.

But I am convinced that numbers in a church have nothing at all to do with the church. A church should never be measured by numbers and success. A church must always be measured by its faithfulness.

You see I believe it is easy to fill a church. What we do is provide an hour or so of good entertainment each Sunday. We help people feel very comfortable in the pew, we give away gifts and awards especially to the children and we have regular gimmicks and giveaways. If we advertise all this on a regular basis they will be drawn in by the hundreds.

Only once in a while will we speak about a person called Jesus but mainly this will be in the context of giving money so that we can provide the next weeks round of entertainment. And we all go home happy.

Churches are easy places to fill.

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But the church is not here to see how many people it can pack in the pews. The church is not concerned with being successful or showing a profit. The church must always be concerned with being faithful to Christ.

And sometimes being faithful to Christ, sometimes asking others , challenging others to be faithful to Christ means that some cannot, or will not, or some just find it hard to do.

Even in today's gospel some of the disciples of Jesus drew back and no longer went about with him.

Now these were disciples. They were not casual acquaintances, or one of the crowd who followed him. These were disciples, some of the inner group, the closest friends of Jesus. But they could not commit themselves to the words of Jesus. They could not count themselves as being truly committed to Jesus. They could not live the life that was asked of them by Jesus. So they left Jesus.

What is interesting is that Jesus did not change what he said in order that they would come back. He did not sugar coat the message to make it more palatable. He did not say what they wanted to hear. He even asked the other disciples if they too wanted to leave.

Jesus was not concerned with numbers of disciples or even success of the disciples. Jesus was concerned about people being committed to him. Being faithful to him. Not only listening to his words but living and worshipping according to his words. Even though being his disciple, at times was not easy.

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And that has not changed. Jesus still asks each one of us for a commitment to him. A life in Christ that is not just some outward show of religion. It is a life that we discipline ourselves in prayer and in the sacraments. We discipline ourselves in deepening our understanding of what it was that Jesus taught and reflect that in our worship and in our lives. We discipline ourselves in stewardship not just of our money but of our whole life.

A life that daily studies and practices the teachings of Jesus so that we absorb into our life his character, his mind, his ways his strength and his power.

And some of it is not easy.

Love your enemies

Do good to those who hate you

Do not be anxious about what you eat or what you wear

Deny yourself and follow me

Let the children come to me do not hinder them

You know, this is not really popular stuff that pulls in the crowds.

Christianity cannot be, must not be, and will never be something that can be measured by numbers on a Sunday morning. Christianity can only be, and will only be measured by the level of commitment

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made to Jesus and the difference it makes in the life of a person. And then it is the difference you make with the people you are with and in the place that Jesus has put you in.

Sometimes it is not easy. Some who were with Jesus did not find it easy and they left. But for those who stayed, and believed, and followed, and listened and watched, for those who committed themselves to Christ, they came to know him more deeply as the holy one of God.

What is asked of us is not success, but faithfulness. May each one of us endeavor to live the life that is worthy of the calling of Christ.

Amen.

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