

## PASTOR'S NOTES

### STILL MORE ON HEBREWS 10:25

*[This scripture is the theme verse of a sermon I preached online near the end of March. Links to that sermon are on the church webpage. It was so long that I had to divide it into seven parts. For those of you who have bravely ventured through all seven parts, I commend you, but I am finding I can still say more about the passage.]*

*“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.” -Hebrews 10:25 (NIV)*

Through the month that we have been in a state of semi-quarantine, the scripture that has come back to me more than any other is the one above. It is a scripture that many pastors (including me) use to remind people of our need to meet together if we are to grow in our faith. When persons say to me that they do not need to come to worship services to be faithful Christians, I believe they are partly correct, but usually they are saying this because they have had bad experiences in churches that have led them to leave. Also, it is very rare for persons on their own to grow to be more like Christ in their life.

I realize I am assuming something that our culture does not: that to be a Christian is not just to say that I believe in Jesus Christ, but it means **I intend to live with Him as my Lord (or Master) and to become like Him.** There are many people who assume they are Christian but they do not see it as a way of life, and this might not be their fault. We preachers have emphasized what Jesus has done for us, and what He can do for us. Many people have barely heard how wonderful our life can be if He truly is in charge and we are “following Him.”

In the twenty plus years that I have lived in the Franklinton neighborhood of Columbus, we saw this firsthand: when we would talk to neighbors, we found that overwhelmingly, the people around us saw themselves as Christians. They could point to a time when at one of the altars of our churches they had come forward and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior (the one who rescues us). However, we also knew a large number of them to be abusive to their children, having no qualms about taking something that is not theirs, taking and selling drugs, and even trafficking persons to provide income or support their addiction. In other words, their life didn't look much different than persons who told us that they didn't believe in God or Christ.

For our group of churches, I think our hope was that if we just got these persons into our church service, they would just “get it.” There would be something in the music or the sermon, or observing how we church people love each other, and they would see that there is a path in life they could take for themselves and enjoy all the blessings of Christ. But in our experience, they didn't just “get it.” People on the outside would attend a worship service, sometimes once, sometimes up to six months, but would likely stop attending by then.

So what is missing? As a preacher, sometimes I've blamed myself for not being engaging enough for them from the pulpit, sometimes we blame the music or the enthusiasm of our leaders. Sometimes there is some truth in those observations. But I believe that it is far more likely that we have set ourselves up for failure from the beginning.

This became clearer to me when we made the difficult decision to close our building for public worship last month. We read the Bible passage above “*Let us not give up meeting together,*” but how are we going to do that without a worship service? Some suggested that we go to online services, as many of our sister congregations have already been doing. This is not a bad idea, and indeed several of us have been talking over the past year on how we could stream our regular service online. However, I have come to

believe that the Hebrews passage above was never intended to mean public worship services. For many years of Christian history, it COULD NOT.

This is not the first time that Christians have had to avoid public worship; even today in some parts of the world Christians risk being killed or arrested if they are caught meeting in a group larger than 10, and sometimes even that large a group is in danger. So how have Christians met together and grown more like Christ, and brought more people into the faith under these conditions? I am convinced it is because they focused on three basic parts of our faith: praying together, looking at the Bible together, and sharing our personal stories. Any 2 or 3 Christians who come together can do these things; and for us today we can do this by phone or computer, or outside with a little distance between us. But the important thing is to include these elements in our encounters with others. You see, the passage above doesn't just say that we should meet together, but that we *encourage one another*. We need to be able to talk and listen to each other to be able to do that. Ironically, a gathering of 15 or more people is probably too many to be able to do this well, so for this our worship services are too big. This doesn't mean those services are unwanted; it means that they work best if the people participating are already doing the basic three at other times.

I have told the story a few times about the Methodist Church in Angola. During the civil war of 1975-1991, all of the church buildings were destroyed, and almost all the pastors were killed or imprisoned. Yet during that time, the number of members went from 12,000 to 60,000! People continued to grow in Christ and brought others in even when it was dangerous to do so, and they did so without church buildings and with almost no official leadership. So how did they do this? They did what they could do: meet together in small groups, pray together, look at the Bible together, and share their personal stories. It was risky then, but apparently they felt it was worth the risk.

Here and now, there is little danger in us meeting online or over the phone, but we still have an opportunity to focus on the basics. I pray that this will be a time for you to learn a bit more about God and about each other. When this pandemic is past, I am convinced that our Lord intends for us not just to feel stronger in our faith, but we will be able to see that stronger faith in each of us.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kam' or similar, written in a cursive style.