

**FOLLOWING JESUS - THE UNPARALLELED AUTHORITY AND POWER OF JESUS**

**There's a shutter of apprehension going through the American church** as we are experiencing a national phenomenon of pre-pandemic church-attenders being very slow to return to worship and the life of being church together.

If people are slow to return to worship, you can know that they are being even slower to return to the broader engagement with all the rest of the ministries, educational programs, and the additional relational benefits that come with being reconnected to your church family and friends.

- Simply said, as people are beginning to emerge from the pandemic shutdown, many people for whom church was a priority are now putting other things first.
- The once normal faith discipline of regular worship feels hard for some to return to. Families with children especially seem to be struggling with returning to worship.
- As worship frequency goes down, so does the feeling of relational connection at church.
- As participation falls off, so does volunteerism, and with that some ministries can't happen.
- Soon a lag in financial stewardship follows; then everything gets really hard.
- This chain of events is happening in congregations all over the place.

**The next domino that could fall is this.** Where congregations are quitting on their pastors, many of those pastors, increasingly worn out by it all, are contemplating quitting from their congregations.

- A recent national Barna survey of pastors showed that a full 29% of the pastors polled are seriously considering leaving the ministry altogether.

**I think we collectively just need to step back and take a big calming breath.**

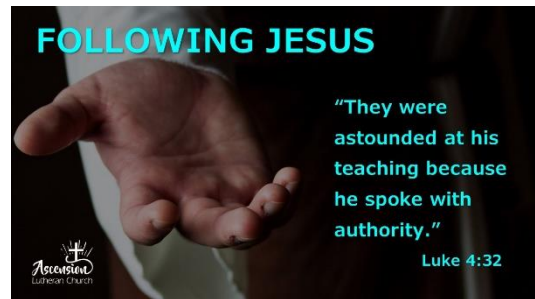
**What it all says to me is that the church is really needed now.**

- When people wander, they tend to get lost.
- When people are lost, the church is especially needed.

**But church can only happen if we make it happen together.**

- We all can recover better if we all recover together.
- The good news is that wherever the people of a church do keep coming together to make church happen, the church is still going to be just fine in that place.

**I think we can do that together here at Ascension, too,** that we can keep coming together to follow Jesus, to worship, to raise our children in the faith, to keep growing in our own faith, and to reach out to others in service and witness.



**In our worship focus today, we are following Jesus together in the Gospel of Luke.**

- We're in chapter 4, in the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry.
- As Luke tells it, Jesus began his public ministry alone before he began calling disciples.

**We pick up Jesus' story just as he is returning from a visit to his hometown, Nazareth, where he had been rejected by his own people.**

- Jesus had announced his mission statement - to proclaim good news to the poor, to bring freedom from captivity and oppression, to bring healing and a new start.
- Now, we'll see how Jesus is going to accomplish this mission.
- He begins by teaching in the weekly Synagogue worship services.
- **Just as weekly worship was the place people first came to know Jesus then, weekly worship is still the first place most people today really come to know Jesus now.**

The story starts in verse 31, *"Then Jesus went down to Capernaum, a town in Galilee, and on the Sabbath, he began to teach."*

- The fishing village of Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee was an important place in Jesus' life.
- Capernaum served as the base and center of his Galilean ministry.
- There is an archaeological site in Capernaum today of a first-century synagogue. An early Christian church had been built over it, leading many to think it is the likely site of the actual Synagogue in which Jesus first began his teaching.

Word of this amazing new young rabbi spread quickly. Verse 32 says, *"They were astounded at his teaching because he spoke with authority."*

- The typical rabbi way was to quote the authority of others, not pretending that themselves were the source of that authority.
- Jesus, by contrast, spoke as though his words were the Word of God itself, which of course it was.
- When the voice of true authority speaks, your ear can hear it, your mind is convinced by the sense of it, and your heart is convicted into life change because of it.
- Such was the teaching of Jesus.

Well, on this one day, a demon had also come to church. Verse 33 says, *"In the synagogue there was a man possessed by a demonic unclean spirit."*

- There was a time when rationalist Christians would get all embarrassed when the Bible started talking about demons, and they would start trying to explain it away.
- Interesting, there's more humility now among a lot of people who say, you know there seems to be a whole lot more to the various layers of reality beyond what we used to think. So maybe we should listen more instead of judging it too quickly.

The unclean spirit challenges Jesus, but Jesus doesn't miss a beat. Jesus doesn't try to argue or reason with the evil spirit. With the voice of authority, he simply rebukes it, *"Be quiet!"* and casts it out, *"Come out of him!"*

- The man is released from his spiritual captivity. This is what Jesus does for people.
- The people are now amazed by the unparalleled power of Jesus. – Who is this?

This is the same Jesus we still follow today.

- He is the Lord.
- He is the Savior.
- There is no other.

If you've been wandering, now is the time to return to Jesus your Lord.

- Welcome back. Welcome home.
- Let's be Jesus' church for each other once again.
- Let's be the church of Jesus also for others as well.
- Let's be the church together again.

Amen.