



10/01/2023

In the Spring of 2021, we had just started gathering back together in person in Dent and Vergas UMC “after” Covid. We were trying to get past Covid.

As we re-gathered on Sundays in March and April, I noticed we were struggling. We were shell-shocked, dazed, and walking around like zombies.

We were sort of scratching our heads, wondering what just happened? And what does the future hold?

So, I decided to take a risk. I had no idea how people would respond or IF they would respond. Might be opening myself up to one of those horrible cringy moments - where all you hear after suggesting something are...

...crickets playing in the background. Love it!

Real crickets played for me Wednesday evening. The Confirmation Kids and the amazing Lydea and I were around our gorgeous bonfire pit. And I asked what did Noah’s story teach us about God? Pause, and literal crickets filled the gap. That was funny!

Back to my earlier story, I risked and suggested in both churches we get together to go...

...kayaking? It was kinda lame, and it was all I had to offer. Because I was running on empty too. So, anybody? Kayaking? Thursday? And maybe I heard crickets, maybe we all did?

But I showed up that evening, bolstering myself with the thought that at least I am going to have a good evening. I can kayak by myself. I waited...crickets, waited...crickets got louder.

But then two others showed up, hauling their kayaks out of their trucks, with smiles on their faces. Whew! Not a complete failure. And we had a lovely evening.

And then this thing just snowballed! I don’t know how or why. By the second or third week we had...

...a pontoon option for those who couldn’t kayak. We added a bonfire and then food started showing up. We’d have 10 to 20 people each week, new people too. For some perspective, we had about 25 people in the church on a Sunday.

Biggest night was maybe 23 or 24 on the water, couple of pontoons, with maybe 14 kayaks on the lake? Beautiful seeing all those colorful kayaks!

The Lord used nature and bi-lateral stimulation of kayaking to help get us unstuck. The Lord used laughter and food and a bonfire to help us heal.

But I had to risk, try something, with no guarantees.

And I noticed something important kayaking was teaching me about following Jesus.

You can't keep one foot on the dock and one foot in the kayak and expect THAT to work for long. Following Jesus requires us to be ALL IN!

We have all experienced times in our lives when we have to begin something new without any guarantee of success. A new job or a new friendship. Maybe its adding a new skill like learning a new language or joining a book group.

In all these cases, there are certain risks involved. There are often things that come up that we couldn't have predicted ahead of time, like more challenges. Sometimes we pull back and regroup for a moment.

And then we might find ourselves asking questions like, "What do I have to lose by trusting God? Or moving in a new direction? Why not go all in?"

Because ultimately, we know, we were created to LIVE our lives and not just watch the days drift by.

John 3:16 is one of the most popular verses in the New Testament. The verse sums up how God is committed to being "all in" for the world, for all the people and all the animals and the whole earth that God has created.

God did not simply create the world and then watch pensively on the sidelines to see what happened...??

No, God LOVES the world! God's loves pulled God into getting involved, loved propelled him off the bench and out on to the playing field. God went ALL IN!

God went ALL IN By sending Jesus Christ, in the FLESH for all humanity.

And because God is all in for us, we are liberated from sin and death and fear and self-centeredness. We are freed for relationship with God and each other, free to risk and fail, free and called to be all in for God.

God's being all in for us is the foundation of this series and our annual stewardship campaign.

Granted, not all risks are worth taking – some can be just plain foolish and downright dangerous. Like kayaking without wearing a life vest. Don't do it.

But in Luke 5:1-11 Simon Peter is willing to throw his fishing net "all in" the deep waters, amid exhaustion and fear, because Jesus tells him to, and he trusts Jesus.

He has been hearing about Jesus. Jesus had been to his home and had even healed his mother – in – law. Peter has been listening to Jesus teach the crowds and knows that this is someone he can trust, even if it doesn't fully make sense yet.

In this situation, Peter goes all in. And the risk pays off with a huge catch of fish.

Even though there are some scary moments along the way – people are watching, the nets were beginning to break, the boats were beginning to sink. People were still watching. Jesus was watching and smiling.

Simon Peter's reaction is very human. He is in awe of what Jesus is doing and exclaims, **“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!”** This reaction shows that he does not believe himself worthy to be a part of the amazing things Jesus is doing.

And that is honest. We can understand that. We often push Jesus away because of feeling unworthy.

Yet Jesus calls Peter to not to be afraid but to follow him. Feel the fear and do it anyway. Despite how scary it is, leaving their boats, their livelihoods, and their families; Simon Peter, James, and John go all in with Jesus.

This doesn't mean they were unafraid or that they wouldn't make mistakes along the way. We have a record of all their mistakes in the New Testament. But in response to what Jesus had done, they take a “leap of faith.”

Notice, they do not negotiate with him. They don't check their social calendars or bring a proposal to be part-time disciples, or try to get other things done first.

They weren't straddling their commitment...one leg in the kayak on one on shore. They commit to fully following Jesus. Both feet in, all in, fully embodied following of Jesus.

What about us? What would it mean for us, every one of us, to go “all in” for Jesus? How might we do some risk management?

What if we go “all in” and we have to love ourselves more than we actually do? That we might have to forgive ourselves and befriend ourselves in deeper ways.

What if we have to start pushing back against old tapes in our heads, those old voices from siblings or classmates and begin to believe we are enough, we are loved, and capable?

The longer I live, the more time the Lord has had to help me understand I do not have to be perfect. As if there was any real fear of that happening, cheeze!

But I am a recovering perfectionist. Years spent paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake or hearing those dreaded crickets!

Jesus is not asking us to be perfect at things. We do not have to be sure of ourselves or know the outcome ahead of time, which is impossible.

The Lord will help us each step of the way. We just have to take the first step in faith, and commit to the journey, including the ups and downs. He will help us. He has promised, **“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”**

He is still promising... **“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

My latest risk? My latest going “All In”? Was in taking a risk to try and launch...

...Fresh Expressions, a new outreach initiative in our Conference and in our church. Oh I was nervous! I didn't want to do it. As I talked about it, I heard crickets.

But I felt God calling me to do it. Ugh!

I prayed and prayed some more. Made some cold calls. Prayed. And held an Informational Meeting. And at that Informational Meeting a couple of Sundays ago, we had maybe 12 or 13 people come. Whew!

Of that number about 9 or 10 said yes to being part of the leadership team. Wow!

About 4 said yes to the one-day training that was held yesterday! A couple more wanted to come but had other commitments. There were over 500 people online, over 120 churches represented in MN and the Dakotas...God is up to something!

The denomination has never seen such a response to any initiative in the history of our conference, either in the US or in England. God helped us be a part of making history.

And about 9 people said they would be praying for Fresh Expressions.

That is a pretty positive response! I saw your love for God. I saw you take leaps of faith. I saw you commit even when you couldn't see how this will all unfold.

Thank you for listening to God and taking bold steps of faith. You were ready for God to do a new thing here.

But we know this being “all in” for Jesus is going to look different for different people. For example, for some it might mean stepping up to serve maybe as a Greeter for the very first time, even though they are shy.

For others, it might mean telling a coworker their faith story even though they fear rejection.

For others, it might mean starting to give financially something each month or to even increase their giving to that 10% called the tithe.

For others, being open to serving on a committee, being open to being contacted by our Partners in Ministry team.

Whatever we feel called by God to do, dear friends, remember we are not called to go “all in” for God to earn God’s favor or to pay God back for all the blessings we have received.

We are saved and loved and guided by grace. Abundant grace.

And it comes down to trust, can we trust in the One who created us? Can we take a risk at being a part of new things God is calling us to in our church and in the world?

Do you dare to listen carefully? Because you might just hear Jesus speaking, deep calling to deep, saying: **“Do not be afraid! From now on you will be catching people.”**

And you might be surprised to hear yourself whisper back, **“Here I am, Jesus. Send me!”** Amen.

**As we move to a time of reflection...**

Let’s each ask the Lord how he might be calling you to be ALL IN?

And then let’s listen carefully.