

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Out of Sync"

Scripture: Acts 17:1-9

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May 11, 2020

Songs/Hymns: Oh worship the King 313 (1,2,4,5), Above All,

We all want to be accepted.

We all want to fit in.

And so we change our behavior, sometimes even our values,

So we can be a member of the group.

"Wikihow" describes twelve steps to fit in at school,

Steps that could apply to any situation.

Let me share just the first four.

Step One.

Identify the group that you want to fit in with.

Most likely this will be the popular "in" crowd,

but think of specific words that describe the group.

This will help you better visualize

and organize the things you will need to do to fit in.

Step Two.

Be mindful of the social norms at your school.

Your desired group is likely appealing

because they have strayed from certain behaviors and interests...

Step Three.

Observe your group to find out what they value most.

Look for favorite band T-shirts, instruments,

or sports equipment they carry.

Eavesdrop a little and find out what topics they discuss most.

Step Four.

Do... things which show that you have similar values.

If your group loves reading Harry Potter,
bring a Harry Potter book to school and read it in class.
If they like wearing specific colors,
try wearing those colors too...

Imitation is very important when it comes to being likable.ⁱ

We all want to be accepted.
We all want to fit in.

Over the past year I found myself more and more interested
in buying a rifle.
It's not because I go hunting,
Or I'm all that interested in target shooting.

It's because in the military there is a big gun culture
And it would give me something to talk
With my friends in my regiment.

Everyone wants to fit in.

But at some point, you will need to ask yourself
How much you are willing to modify your identity
and change your values to belong.

This is an especially important questions for those who follow Jesus.
Jesus takes his followers down a nonconformist path
And puts us on the outs
With those with whom we'd rather be 'in'.

Today's Bible lesson brings us past the halfway mark
In the book of Acts.

In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus promises his disciples
That they will be his witnesses
“in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth.”ⁱⁱ

After Pentecost the Gospel starts spreading
In these very directions.

But while it is welcomed, it also encounters resistance.

Last week I talked about Peter’s healing of the lame man
At that Temple gate called ‘Beautiful’.
The healing leads to an opportunity for preaching,
But the preaching gets Peter and John arrested.

Today as we fast forward through a number of chapters
We encounter Paul and Silas on Paul’s second missionary journey.
In Philippi they successfully plant a new church,
But also get beaten with rods and thrown into jail.

Fresh out of this experience they move on to Thessalonica,
Where we encounter them in today’s reading.

As was his custom Paul starts talking about Jesus in the local synagogue.
He argues that Scripture foretold a suffering savior.
He contends that Jesus was the Messiah they were waiting for.

While Paul doesn’t have a great success among the Jews
We are told a large number of God-fearing Greeks were persuaded,
As were a number of prominent women.

Sounds like a success.

But some people didn’t appreciate his preaching or his proselytism.
A crowd was stirred up.
They began to riot and started searching for Paul and Silas.

When they couldn't find the evangelists,
They settled for some local converts.
They broke into to their home
And dragged these Christians before the authorities.

They claimed that these converts, these Christians
Were causing an uproar in the city.

Now if you read the story,
you can see that these are trumped-up charges.
These new Christians are not intent
on overthrowing the local council;

They are certainly not starting an armed insurrection.

And yet there is something accurate about those accusations of sedition.
These Christians are following another king.

Really? And you thought Christians were model citizens.

Some of you have taken an oath to become a citizen of Canada.
You have promised to "be faithful and bear true allegiance
to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Queen of Canada,
Her Heirs and Successors..."ⁱⁱⁱ

And yet each week at church
We make another pledge of allegiance.

Together we say:

"Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be THY name,
THY kingdom come,
THY will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven."^{iv}

Each week we confess our devotion to God's kingdom.
We proclaim Jesus as Lord.
This puts us out-of-sync with society.

This wasn't always the case.

For many years being a Christian
and being Canadian was practically synonymous.

Just after World War II, 67 percent of Canadians
had attended a religious service in the previous seven days.
But by 2013 that number had dropped to a mere 13%.^v

What this means is that those who follow Jesus
Will be increasingly out of sync in their society.
The same people who want to find themselves accepted
Will be increasingly rejected.

But being rejected was true of our Lord and Savior,
Was true of the early Christians,
And continues to be true of many Christians
In the rest of the world.

As I was preparing for this sermon I found a newspaper article
From the British paper *The Guardian*.
The article noted the increasing persecution
of Christians in China.

[As a side-note I couldn't find any similar stories about
The persecution of Chinese Christians in the Canadian media.
The focus here is on the persecution of Muslims.]

Listen to this story printed in January 2019:

In late October, [Wang Yi] the pastor
of one of China's best-known underground churches
asked this of his congregation:

"If tomorrow morning the Early Rain Covenant Church
suddenly disappeared from the city of Chengdu...
would this city be any different?
Would anyone miss us?" ...

Almost three months later,
Wang's hypothetical scenario is being put to the test.

The church in south-west China has been shuttered
and Wang and his wife...remain in detention
after police arrested more than 100
Early Rain church members in December.

Many of those who haven't been detained are in hiding.
Others have been sent away from Chengdu
and barred from returning.

Some, including Wang's mother and his young son,
are under close surveillance.

Wang and his wife are being charged
for "inciting subversion" [sound familiar?]
a crime that carries a penalty of up to 15 years in prison...

Early Rain is the latest victim
of what Chinese Christians and rights activists say
is the worst crackdown on religion
since the country's Cultural Revolution,
when Mao Zedong's government
vowed to eradicate religion...

Pastors such as Wang of Early Rain are especially alarming for authorities.

Under Wang, a legal scholar and public intellectual,
the church has advocated for parents of children
killed in the 2008 Sichuan earthquake –

deaths many critics say were caused
by poor government-run construction

– or for families of those affected by faulty vaccines.

Every year the church commemorates victims
of the 4 June protests in 1989,
which were forcibly put down by the Chinese military...

Wang and Early Rain belong to what some see
as a new generation of Christians
that has emerged alongside a growing civil rights movement.

Increasingly, activist church leaders have taken inspiration
from the democratising role the church played
in eastern European countries in the Soviet bloc
or South Korea under martial law...

Several of China's most active human rights lawyers are Christians.

"[Chinese leadership has come] to see the political potential
of Christianity as a force for change," [says one scholar].

"What really makes the government nervous
is Christianity's claim to universal rights and values."^{vi}

It seems that there are people in China
Just as suspicious of Christians as those people in Thessalonica.

It seems that proclaiming "Jesus is Lord" is considered by many
To be a political statement.
It seems that Jesus' followers are deemed to have values
that clash with the societies they live in.

Of course, we live in a liberal democracy.
Our government recognizes on the Christian value
of the dignity of all peoples,
and tends to uphold the freedoms of minorities.

We might reasonable expect that if people won't like us
They will at least tolerate us.

But this brings us to the assertion I made at the very beginning.
We all want to be accepted.
We all want to fit in.

Well what you should know is that while you might not
Be chosen as a friend or confidant in post-Christendom Canada,
While you might not be elected as city counselor,
Or invited to be the secretary of your school PAC...

You are chosen and beloved by God.

Listen to the words Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica,
Maybe a few weeks after all this chaos erupted
In the city:

“Paul, Silas and Timothy,
To the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
Grace and peace to you.

We always thank God for all of you
and continually mention you in our prayers.

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith,
your labor prompted by love,
and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.

For we know, brothers and sisters
loved by God, that he has chosen you...”^{vii}

Do you want to be accepted?
Do you want to fit in?

Know that you are also loved by God and chosen.
Love by GOD, and chosen.

May this fill your hearts with courage.

Amen.

ⁱ “How to Fit In” April 25, 2020 <https://www.wikihow.com/Fit-In>

ⁱⁱ Acts 1: 8 NIV

ⁱⁱⁱ “The Oath of Citizenship” www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2019/05/the-oath-of-citizenship.html

^{iv} “The Lord’s Prayer”

^v Rick Hiemstra, Karen Stiller “Religious affiliation and attendance in Canada” 2016 www.intrust.org/Magazine/Issues/New-Year-2016/Religious-affiliation-and-attendance-in-Canada

^{vi} Lily Kuo “In China, they’re closing churches, jailing pastors – and even rewriting scripture” January 13, 2019 www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/13/china-christians-religious-persecution-translation-bible

^{vii} 1 Thessalonians 1:1-4 NIV