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John 7:1-13
So That You May Believe: John
“Secret Jesus”

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Throughout life there are people who want to influence us to say or do certain things, or make certain decisions, or live a certain way. I remember as a 7th or 8th grade middle school student being given a University of California – Berkeley sweatshirt by some relatives who lived in the Bay area. My cousin, Charlie, would go to UC Berkley just a few years later, in fact. And I wore that sweatshirt with pride. But I remember people asking me: do you want to go to Berkley for college? To be honest, I really didn't, but slowly I started thinking that maybe I did, and for a time I thought it was where I might want to go to school after High School. And the only reason that seed even got planted in my head was because of this sweatshirt and the questions and encouraging statements I'd get from wearing it. It almost started to feel like an expectation that that is where I would eventually go.

The expectations of others can have a huge influence on us. The pressure to do what others want, and just go with the flow can be immense. And in today's passage, we see that Jesus had those kinds of expectations on him, too. He knows what it is to have people who want you to do something that you realize may not really be the best thing for you to do. So as we continue in our journey through the Gospel of John, we are in the **first 13 verses of John 7**. This is God's Word to you and me today.

So, after the events we looked at the last few weeks that comprise chapter 6, **Jesus stayed in the region of Galilee, which is north of Jerusalem.** Piecing together the clues we get about the time of year they're in – for instance the mentioning of the Feast of Tabernacles in today's passage – it looks like he stayed in this region for about 6 months. That's a pretty significant chunk of time spent all at once in a region that is not known for being stocked with leaders and influencers, unlike in Jerusalem. But he had his reasons for not going south, partly because he had angered some of the Jewish religious leaders enough that they were looking for ways to kill him. Even earlier in John's gospel this kind of plotting against him has been mentioned.

And the way John tells us about Jesus' staying in Galilee is important and we can learn from it. Verse 1 says, "After this, Jesus went around in Galilee..." **More literally translated, the Greek reads, "After these things, Jesus was walking in Galilee..."** We might wonder what this means when it says he "was walking" in Galilee. Was he racking up steps on his smart watch or fitness tracker? Did he do anything besides walk?

John means this as a beautiful metaphor for how Jesus carried out his ministry. And, like walking: it was not particularly extraordinary or flashy. We have seen the spectacular from him on multiple occasions. And while the spectacular drew a crowd and were great vehicles for publicity and casting a wide net and Jesus did to things that wowed people...they really were not the primary vehicle for Jesus' ministry. It was in the everyday things. **Jesus knew that ministry and his mission was going to be better accomplished at a walking pace rather than the pace and flash of a 100-yard dash.**

In his commentary on John, Roger Fredrickson tells of his uncle who was a missionary in Northeast India for 28 years. When his uncle passed away, Roger went to the memorial service, and met a man who was discipled by his uncle in India. He said, "Everything I am I owe to your uncle who taught me the Bible and the meaning of the Jesus way as we walked from village to village. He showed me how to drive a nail and said that if I agreed to be at a place at 7:00 then I must be there at 7:00." That had been 50 years earlier, and this guy had gone on to disciple countless other people who had gone on to be pastors as he had. Fredrickson then writes, **"This was Jesus' style of ministry—teaching, sharing, and modeling as He walked from place to place with his small band—the most valid, lasting kind of discipling"** (Roger Fredrickson).¹ Frequently, in Jesus' ministry and in the 2,000 years since, it's that kind of slow, relationship-based discipleship that bears real fruit.

But there's pressure from Jesus' brothers to do the more spectacular and to do so in the places where he'd get the most publicity – specifically, to go to Jerusalem. Now, these brothers are his younger half-brothers as we might rightly call them, not his spiritual brothers who are his disciples. We know this because John tells us that these brothers did not believe in him. That

can't be describing the disciples, who Jesus does call his brothers later on, because they believed. Peter just said so in the verses right before this (John 6:69) that we looked at last week.

They want him to go to Jerusalem “...so that your disciples there may see the works you do. No one who wants to become a public figure acts in secret. Since you are doing these things, show yourself to the world” (John 7:3-4). So, they want Jesus to go south to Jerusalem to pump up his numbers in the polls, so to speak. They clearly have their minds set that Jesus is an earthly, political leader, which was the common understanding of the Messiah in their time. They want pyrotechnics like walking on water and feeding thousands with a few loaves of bread, and lame people made to walk and blind people made to see...and they want it all done in Jerusalem under the bright lights of the big city where things will spread more rapidly by well-connected people on social media and over the airwaves. They've had enough of this small-town ministry stuff that's rooted in the day-to-day rhythms of life, like walking.

But Jesus has seen that those splashy things aren't always received so well: Sure, they get people's attention, they meet needs and serve people...but people tend to only want more. We've already seen that several times earlier in John's gospel.² So, that's what the people want...but it frequently doesn't lead to heart transformation. It can open the door to faith, it can get the ball rolling...but it doesn't replace the hard work of discipleship. That happens much more slowly, while walking through life. Bruce Milne puts it well in his commentary on this when he writes, **“Hunger for spectacular signs is the enemy of real faith, since it leaves the fallen, self-centered heart untouched and unrebuked” (Bruce Milne).**³ Jesus is all about real faith that transforms lives, starting with our hearts.

So, Jesus says he's not going to go to Jerusalem, even though the Festival of Tabernacles is happening. By the way, Passover celebrated God miraculously leading their ancestors to escape from Egypt; The Feast of Tabernacles celebrated God's provision for them in the following years when they wandered around in the desert.

And, initially he says, “no.” But after further reflection and discernment, and we aren’t privy to Jesus’ thoughts on this, he decides to go. But he’s not going to do the spectacular. **He’s going to do this his way, not their way.** They’re like bulls in a china shop, Jesus is much more subtle. They even accuse him of being “secretive” and want him to bust out of that mode. We talked about this last week as well, that Jesus will not be controlled by human thoughts or desires. Jesus is free to act as he desires. Now, he never abuses that freedom and operates selfishly; instead he is always on mission for his heavenly father for the purpose of drawing people into relationship with himself, with God the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus talks openly elsewhere about only doing what his heavenly father tells him to do. There’s no human control in regards to what happens or when it happens – and that includes right here as Jesus decides their way of doing things is not the right way, and instead he goes on his own terms, in secret as verse 10 says.

Two times here Jesus is said to do things in secret – once by his brothers who see it as a negative thing, and then by John, using the same word, to describe Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem. Now, keep in mind, he doesn’t stay completely hidden in Jerusalem. In fact, next week, we see him with a crowd of people where he teaches them and engages in conversation with them. And it’s not as though the signs go away – he heal a guy who’s blind and raises Lazarus from the dead in the coming chapters. But John begins to put even more emphasis on what Jesus has to say...what his teaching is...and less on the spectacular.

And I think that’s a good word for the church today. **For the last 40 years or so the church here in America – and elsewhere too, but especially here in America – has been caught up in a “bigger is better, let’s put on a show” kind of mentality.** Frequently, the teachings of Jesus are minimized, Scripture reading is reduced to a verse or two each Sunday and there’s been more emphasis on putting on a well-produced show...on giving everyone a memorable experience or meeting a particular need. This is particularly true in worship, but it’s also been true in children’s ministries, youth ministries, adult ministries...even global and local missions endeavors have succumbed to this. Now, let me say: we certainly want to do worship well; we want ministry to be done with excellence. No one wants a sloppy service or

discipleship class or weekend retreat that isn't thought out and led well. I'm not talking about that. And I think it also needs to be acknowledged that there's a certain degree of subjectivity about where the line is drawn to say "on this side of the line is true gospel-centered ministry, and on this side it's a show". 10 people in a room will have 10 different opinions on that.

But, there was a study done by Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago a few years ago that looked at the fruits of discipleship in their own church. Interestingly, in light of John telling us that Jesus went to Jerusalem in secret, the book that gave the results of their study is called, "Reveal." Willow Creek has been one of the leading churches in this movement toward the spectacular...ministry that revolves around programs and events, with the underlying assumption being that if people are involved in more and more ministry programs and events, their discipleship to Jesus would grow. And in a nutshell: **The results of the study showed that their own ministry model wasn't producing mature disciples of Jesus.** It *did* work to reach new people. It *did* get people interested in finding out more about Jesus. But the longer someone was a part of the church, the more likely they were to have plateaued and felt like they weren't growing anymore.

So, it's not that events and big gatherings that energize us and draw a crowd are bad. Jesus himself does do them. **The problem is when we think that doing those things and participating in them makes us a mature follower of Jesus. They don't.** What helps us grow in faith, and what helps others grow in faith as we minister to them, is simply to follow what Jesus did in Galilee, as John tells us in the first verse: to walk. To walk through life with God, with each other, and with others who we can disciple by simply living our faith and showing what it means to be a Jesus-follower.

As many of you know, our Elder's Vision Narrative has been shared with you in some Town Hall gatherings lately, and has been sent out to the congregation via email and is available here at the church as well. At the center of it is this idea of walking with each other and with other people in our lives as a way of discipling others. There is no mention of programs or events. It doesn't mean they won't happen. But they aren't the centerpiece of discipleship in this model. And this comes straight out of Jesus' ministry. **His**

discipleship model was so reduced from the public eye that his own family said he was being secretive. Now, we know that wasn't 100% true, but the big splashy things were not what he was all about. He was about walking with people through life. And we want to get our church on track with that as well. This is where we're headed.

Interestingly, if you're bored with your faith and bored with church, I think you'll find this model is invigorating and engaging. Participating in more programs and events is not what invigorates a mature disciple of Jesus. That's what Willow Creek discovered about their own church. Additionally, just this week I read a fantastic article in the most recent edition of *Relevant* (online Christian publication) that was titled, "So, You're Bored With the Church". And in it the author writes these words, **"The reality is, we are bored because we are disobedient. I bet painters who don't paint are bored. I bet dancers who don't dance are bored. I bet writers who don't write are bored. And I'm convinced that disciples who don't disciple are bored"** (Grant Skeldon, "So, You're Bored With the Church," *Relevant*).⁴

"Disciples who don't disciple are bored." I wonder if that describes any of us. Jesus knew this. It's why he spent 3 years mentoring, coaching, and discipling the 12 disciples – mostly by just being with them, walking with them...being in relationship with them. That was the core of his ministry. And when you think about it, it fits with what the mission of his ministry is as well. Because his mission is about transforming us from the inside so we'd have a right relationship with God. See: It's not spectacular or public. We might say it's a secret thing inside of us, and between us and God. It's a heart transformation thing, and a renewing of our minds...it's letting go of our pride and bowing our wills and our hearts to Jesus, who is King of kings and Lord of lords, and then living each day for him. It's different than the expectations of the world and the direction the world would lead us, just as Jesus experienced here with his brothers. But it's in the heart and in our mind where he goes to work *in* each of us, and he's working *through* us to disciple others as well. And that happens most effectively as we walk through life with Jesus and with those people he puts around us. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Roger Fredrickson, *The Preacher's Commentary – John*, p. 140.

² John 2:23-24, 4:48, 5:13, 6:26.

³ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John*, p. 117.

⁴ <https://relevantmagazine.com/faith/christians-arent-boring-theyre-just-bored/>