

UNSETTLED

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Settled is a good feeling. I like it better than unsettled.

When we go camping, which we try to do at least once each year, we like to get an early start (Thursday or Friday) to beat the weekend crowd and get our favorite spot and get settled in. Some people might think it's too much work, but we like "setting up house" for the week. Then we can relax.

Whenever you have to move to a new residence, the packing seems like a gigantic task, mostly because you've forgotten how much stuff you've squirreled away over the years, and now you're forced to decide what's really worth keeping. The unloading seems to go so quickly—the truck is empty in no time. But the unpacking can take months. If the truth be told, we still have one or two boxes packed that we brought with us 31 years ago! But doesn't it feel good when at last you are settled into your new place?

Life is unsettling. Change is inevitable, and those changes are often difficult and frustrating, whether it's a new location, or a new job, or new friends.

But the worst thing is to settle for something that is less than good for you.

In 1976, we bought our first car. We had two growing children and our VW Bug was just not big enough any more. So we bought a new, blue Dodge Aspen stationwagon. Since we were custom ordering from the factory, the dealer asked if we wanted air conditioning in the car (\$500 extra). We lived in San Francisco and air conditioning seemed unnecessary, so we declined it, preferring to save the \$500 (even though it would have been spread over five years of payments). All was fine for a couple of years, until we moved to Redding, where the summer heat is consistently in the triple digits. We had settled, when we should have sprung for it.

Someone has said, "The enemy of the best is not the worst, but the second best." Because we are disinclined to choose the worst, but may well settle for second best.

Have you ever settled for a job that didn't really suit you. That could be a headache every day!

Sometimes, you shouldn't settle, even if it hurts.

The Jewish people made an annual pilgrimage to Jerusalem in Bible times. For some, it was a long journey, fraught with dangers along the way. And, regardless of where they started the

journey, the last part, when they had already traveled so far, was always a climb, up to the city's gates. But the last part was also the sweetest part! It was there, as the roads converged, that they met other pilgrims, and the party began. There is even a series of Psalms written just for that last leg of the journey (Psalms 120-134, the Songs of Ascent), which they might chant as they climbed together to the Holy City. And they wouldn't have settled for less.

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "People wish to be settled. It is only as far as they are unsettled that there is any hope for them."

Life is unsettling and change is inevitable, but perhaps that, too, is a saving grace—keeping us on our toes, and deepening our appreciation of what we have been given.

Here is one of those Psalms (133), titled "A song for pilgrims ascending to Jerusalem. A psalm of David." Hear its tone of grateful appreciation.

¹ How wonderful and pleasant it is when brothers live together in harmony!

² For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil that was poured over Aaron's head, that ran down his beard and onto the border of his robe.

³ Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon that falls on the mountains of Zion. And there the LORD has pronounced his blessing, even life everlasting.

This is a part of our settled blessing from God. And when we pause to reflect and appreciate it—we recognize that it is good.

Remember what you're a part of: the Church, the family of God!

Human history is the story of God and His people, the story of raising His family in a world cursed by sin, the story of redeeming the lost by extreme grace, the story of restoring wonder and joy by His loyal love.

From Abraham to Moses, to David and Solomon, to Babylon and back again, to the cross of our Savior, the empty tomb of our Lord, the ascension of Jesus, the return of our King, and the marriage supper of the Lamb—it's all our story, because it's His story.

Philip Yancey, author of *Vanishing Grace*, summed up the Gospel message this way: God gets His family back!

And between the ascension of Jesus and His return, there's a great deal going on! This is the age of the Kingdom coming, the age of the Church going, the age of the Family of God becoming, the age of His Presence abiding. And this is where our story takes place!

Kingdom Coming

Christianity is an intimate, growing relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. It is not a set of doctrines to believe, habits to practice, or sins to avoid. Every activity God commands is intended to enhance His love relationship with His people.

Every angelic appearance, every miraculous event, every prophetic message, and, above all else, the arrival of Jesus Christ, was a sign of Heaven breaking into our world.

In all that Jesus said and did, Heaven was touching earth. We have been given glimpses and foretastes of a world yet to come. Jesus introduced us to the Kingdom of God.

As a result, the world has found a hope that prevails in the midst of darkness. In this broken, darkened world of pain and corruption, there is a hope that brightens each day. It is Jesus, and all that His life, death, and resurrection promise.

The Kingdom coming means Life is conquering death. Sin is finished. The devil has been vanquished. Bondage is broken. People are being set free. This is happening every day, all around the world, because the King has come, and the Kingdom is on its way.

When the Church become too self-centered, too shuttered by its own interests and feelings, we remind one another that ours is a Kingdom Life—bigger than our personal experience, or our local church, or our denomination, or our part of the world, or our generation. The Kingdom of God crosses all boundaries—of time and space—and includes all people who trust and follow Jesus Christ.

We are Kingdom people! And we are also the Church that Jesus is building.

Church Going

Kingdom is everywhere, but church is localized. We need to think globally, but we also need to act locally.

The local church is the seedbed, the laboratory, the display case for the life of God's Kingdom. For the love of God's Kingdom.

Jesus said, *"Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples — if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35; NET).

The Kingdom comes to individuals who put their trust in Christ. But the Kingdom is only revealed through those people as they fellowship with each other.

Church is where we get to practice this Kingdom living and loving. It cannot be done on our own. And if it is not done together, then we are not following Jesus fully.

Today, some imagine that Internet blogs and video preachers and musicians can provide the spiritual sustenance that they need. And perhaps they can. But if all you do is sit at home and eat, you'll end up fat and useless.

And if the only spiritual exercise you get is the occasional foray into the world to practice your faith on your own terms—when and where you choose—you will miss so much of what you need. As much as I dislike the immediate effects of regular workouts (the burn, the exhaustion, the aches and pains), I still feel more alive with them than without them, and the long term benefits outweigh the cost.

Church is where you may get regular workouts (including the short-term annoyances, and also the long-term benefits). Church is where strong spiritual bodies are built, seven different ways.

Jesus has given us a task as the Church, which cannot be accomplished as individual Christians: to go and make disciples. One-on-one mentoring is dynamic for forming spirituality, but only in the context of the local church—a local group of committed followers of Jesus.

Making disciples is what the Church is about, but it all happens through the local churches. This is where young converts are introduced to Kingdom living, and witness real disciples in real life situations. This is where the multiple generations of the Church have the opportunity to appreciate and love each other. This is our most effective witness for Jesus.

He has sent us to make disciples from all nations. I can't do that alone. You can't do that by yourself. But together, we can. Together, we can break down prejudice and racial mistrust. Together, we can build bridges of understanding—and more than that, pathways of actual love and sincere kindness.

It is the Church, functioning as local assemblies of believers, that shapes cultures and builds societies—demonstrating our unity and love for Jesus.

Family Becoming

God designed worship for us to see Him in His glory and to respond appropriately; for many it has degenerated into “mere religion”—one more meeting to attend out of habit. That is not Kingdom Life. That is not the Living Church. That is not real Christianity.

By the grace of God that saved us, we are becoming a family—God's Family.

We have been healed by grace. And our healings continue.

Breaking down barriers—both real and perceived—we are learning, not merely to tolerate one another, but to actively care about each other, to appreciate our diversity, to be stretched by our differences, and to grow as a result of the contribution of each to the whole.

We are learning to show love and hospitality, not only to our friends, but also to strangers—who might become new friends and new members of the Family. We are learning to serve one another selflessly (and that's a tall task!).

We are becoming the answer to Jesus' prayer: *"I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me."* (John 17:20-21)

"So that the world will believe." That's what we're doing—bringing Kingdom, doing Church, becoming Family. And we cannot do this by our own strength or know-how. We need the *presence* of the Holy Spirit.

Presence Abiding

Sometimes we forget how we got where we are. We forget the grace and favor of God. We forget that we are still dependent on His mercies every single day—from morning to night, and dusk to daybreak.

The people among whom Jeremiah preached had become so comfortable in the many gifts of God's blessing that they forgot the Giver.

"They did not ask: 'Where is the LORD who delivered us out of Egypt, who brought us through the wilderness, through a land of desert sands and rift valleys, through a land of drought and deep darkness, through a land in which no one travels, and where no one lives?'" (Jeremiah 2:6; NET)

They no longer asked, they no longer sought for Him. The people of Jeremiah's day were satisfied to have the ritual without the manifest presence of God. They became so comfortable with their "religion" that they didn't even notice God's absence.

Is it possible to pray, to attend a worship service, or to give an offering, yet not to experience the presence of God? It certainly is possible! So, beware!

Don't settle for Kingdom without Church!

Don't settle for Church without Family!

Don't settle for Family without Presence!

Don't settle for a religious life that lacks a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.