

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(April 19, 2020)

Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Jesus' NEW Way and a NEW *Ekklesia***

(passages from the Gospels, early chapters of Act)

### **Sermon Series: Jesus' Liberating NEW!**

(the powerful uniquenesses to the way of Jesus)

#### **Introduction: What comes after COVID-19...**

Rarely are we aware that we are in a moment that we will remember for the rest of our lives. We are in one of those moments right now.

We find ourselves in an incredibly dynamic, changing moment. We know that 2020 will be remembered as the year that the world was in the grip of a virus that turned everything upside down.

We're in the middle of the moment now. Increasingly, our minds move from this moment to the question, "*What next?*"

When the fear of overwhelming spikes in infections passes and the shutdown has ended, what will our world look like? What, exactly, do phased-in re-openings involve? Will we ever shake hands again?

What will the economy do? Sputter? Roar back? What will happen to stadium sports, concerts, churches?

There's an understandable combination of *eagerness* for life after the pandemic and *nervousness* for what that life is going to look like. Clearly, some things will be profoundly different than before this moment.

I've had moments in my life like the moment our world is currently experiencing.

My wedding day changed the trajectory of my life - and thank God for that. The day of the births of each of our three children were all great game changers.

And there have been other, more sobering moments, when I've recognized - in the moment - that I was facing an earthquake that would disrupt, alter, change my personal world and make it harder.

After the deaths of family members and good friends, I knew life would never be the same. After certain events I've thought to myself, "*Well, things will never be the same after THAT.*"

You've had the same experiences. You've had your own COVID-19 moments.

So, it isn't hard for any of us to imagine the emotional and the mental states of Jesus' first disciples on the Monday after He was arrested, tried, convicted, beaten, killed, buried and resurrected.

When we try to put ourselves in their sandals, we can picture them saying to themselves, "*Well, nothing will be the same after THAT.*"

They were in a moment of dynamic change and knew it. They knew that their world - and the whole world! - had changed. But they didn't yet know the shape that change would take.

Beginning this morning, we are going to devote four Sundays to exploring what profound and transforming "next" and "new" Jesus ushered in by His death and resurrection.

Last Sunday, Easter Sunday, I wanted to emphasize the personal aspect of what Jesus accomplished when He died on a Roman cross and rose from the dead.

He cried out from the cross, "***It is finished***", meaning that the barrier of sin that had separated God and people was gone, done away with by His own sacrificial death.

The empty tomb guaranteed that anyone who places their trust in the risen Lord Jesus experiences forgiveness, receives eternal life, and becomes a daughter or a son of God.

On Easter I highlighted the personal benefit that comes to everyone one who believes in Jesus. On this Sunday after Easter, we're beginning to look at something else that Jesus accomplished, something bigger than any one of us.

Yes, of course, Jesus came to earth to save sinners. He also came to earth to usher in what the world of that day called The Way.<sup>1</sup>

It was a whole new Way of life with God and a whole new Way of living in a world in need of God.

So, this new series is a chronological and a logical follow-up to Easter.

Here at the beginning, I'll express my gratitude to Pastor Andy Stanley, who has written a remarkable book, Irresistible. This book has validated some things I've believed for a long time, provoked me to a bit more "out there" thinking, and prompted me to bring this series.

While Andy's book was a great catalyst for my thinking, the source material we'll be depending on during these weeks will be what we find in the eyewitness accounts of the Gospels and Acts and the letters written by some of Jesus' earliest followers.

So, I'm really excited about looking with you into the NEW that Jesus brought. And, as I'll point out toward the end of our time together, it may be altogether fitting that we are *not* together today.

(I'll also say, here at the outset that we're covering a whole lot of ground this morning, but ground that I think we need to cover in one sitting. So...hold on tight to your couch cushions!)

---

<sup>1</sup> Observers often used that term - The Way - derisively of the movement that was formed by Jesus' followers after His life and death and resurrection. But it was an accurate description of their mission.

First century Jews, and many people today, had and have a hard time accepting that Jesus wasn't improving something very old, but was bringing into the world something fresh and new.

So, I'm going to start off by taking some time to show how Jesus had made clear that He was not just releasing Judaism 2.0.

The first evidence we're going to see for that are comments Jesus made after He was questioned by some very good people (disciples of John the Baptist) about why He - a rabbi - was doing things differently than other religious leaders.

Here's His answer.

### **A Radically New NEW!**

#### **A NEW That Doesn't Fit with the Old**

***[Matthew 9:16] "But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. [17] "Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."***

There is nothing wrong with old garments or old wine. Both are great. The old wine is worth saving and old garments are worth patching.

But when *new* comes along, you don't mix it with *old*. You let go of *old* and let it pass off the scene. You accept that *new* is better.

You buy the new garment and use the old one as a rag; you replace the car with 300,000 miles with a newer model and donate the old one to charity.

Jesus didn't apologize for doing things differently. His point is that His way is new, implying that the old - the Jewish way - will soon be obsolete. He's brought a *new* to replace *old*.

A bit later in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus made a point that would have been hard for any Jew of His day to hear.

### **Jesus' NEW is Greater Than the Temple**

Jesus was being reprovved by some religious leaders (Pharisees) who objected to His disciples' eating grain as they walked through a field on the sabbath day.

This was a "no-no" for the Pharisees who equated that kind of snacking with work, which was not allowed on the Jewish sabbath.

Jesus defended His disciples' actions, reminding the Pharisees that the priests eat holy bread in the temple on the sabbath and are not guilty of a crime.

In Jesus' day, to bring in an example from the temple was a way to strengthen any argument because the Jerusalem temple was of supreme importance to the life of Israel and to individual Jews.<sup>2</sup>

The temple was the place where the Jews worshiped. They considered it a holy building. Sacred.

We could go on about how highly the Jews regarded the temple, but Jesus wrapped up His defense of His disciples' actions with this.

***[Matthew 12:6] "But I say to you that something greater than the temple is here."***

In other words, *"If priests can eat holy bread in the temple on the sabbath, then I can let My followers eat grain on the sabbath whenever and wherever I want because I'm a bigger deal than the temple."*

The Pharisees would have been appalled by this statement.

---

<sup>2</sup> While speaking to a Samaritan woman (John 4), Jesus anticipates a time when neither in Samaria nor in Jerusalem will people gather to worship God (place won't be a thing). God seeks those who worship *"in spirit and in truth."*

They understood that Jesus was a threat to everything they valued. They rightly saw Him, not as an *and* to Judaism, but as an *instead of*.

In His most famous sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus spoke to a large crowd of people and made other comments about His NEW.

Remember as I read this that Jesus' words were directed to God-fearing Jews who had been raised on what we know as the Old Testament but what they knew as God's Word.

The Jewish Scriptures consist of Genesis - Malachi. In shorthand, *"the Law and the Prophets."*

### **Jesus' NEW Fulfills the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 5:17)**

***[Matthew 5:17] "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill."***

Jesus wasn't saying anything negative about the Old Testament here, and He assured His audience that He had no intention of destroying any of it.

Rather, He's come to bring the Law and the Prophets in for a safe landing. He's going to wrap up the Law and the Prophets and begin something brand new.

It is hard for us to imagine how jarring Jesus' words would have sounded in the ears of a first century Jew.

Later in this revolutionary sermon that introduces us to His "new", Jesus spoke explicitly about Moses and the Mosaic Law and about long-standing Jewish tradition.

### **Jesus' NEW Surpasses the Teaching of Moses (Matthew 5:21ff...)**

***[Matthew 5:21] "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.'***

You and I know that ***“You shall not murder”*** is found in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

It’s solid, God-breathed Scripture. It’s ***“Thus saith the Lord...”***

Jesus follows up that quote of Scripture with:

***[Matthew 5:22] “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”***

The notable and quotable words here are ***“But I say to you...”*** After quoting Moses, you say, “The word of the Lord.” Not, ***“But I say...”***

And He made similar comments in the Sermon on the Mount regarding adultery<sup>3</sup> (Matthew 5:27-28), divorce (vv. 31-32), making oaths (vv. 33-37), revenge (vv. 38-39), and enemies (vv. 43-44).<sup>4</sup>

He quoted Scripture or long-standing Jewish traditions and then followed up with, ***“But I say...”***, amending, raising the bar, or reversing a thousand years of the Jewish worldview.

This is like a High School sophomore who says, after taking a survey course in English literature, *“I don’t really think Shakespeare was such a good writer.”*<sup>5</sup>

That student’s comment says much more about him than it does about Shakespeare.

---

<sup>3</sup> Don’t commit adultery - don’t even look lustfully at a woman.

<sup>4</sup> Israel never turned the other cheek and they were often the aggressor. David had blood on his hands to such a degree that he wasn’t allowed to build God’s temple. Ancient Israel did not love her enemies, so ***“love those who persecute you”*** was very un-Old Covenant-like.

<sup>5</sup> Or someone who says to someone like me that the Beatles really weren’t a very good band.

Here we have a Carpenter from Nazareth taking on Moses, and that’s way more radical.

He’s not Judaism +. Jesus is NEW. His way is NEW.

Just one more example from a familiar scene. Jesus is with His disciples on the night of His betrayal seated for a Passover meal.

### **The New Face of Passover**

Before reading Luke’s description of this scene, I’m going to steal a thought from Andy Stanley’s book, *Irresistible*.

I know it’s a long way away, but this coming December 25<sup>th</sup>, instead of celebrating Jesus’ birthday, I’m asking that we celebrate my birthday here at Northwest, instead. OK?

Of course, I’m glad I can’t see your faces right now. And of course, I’m kidding.

But, with my request rolling around in your mind, listen as Jesus tells His disciples what they should be thinking about when they observe Passover, from now on.

***[Luke 22:19] And when He had taken some bread and given thanks, He broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” [20] And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.”***<sup>6</sup>

As offensive as it was for you to hear me ask that you remember my birthday at Christmas instead of Jesus’ birthday, imagine how Jesus’ comments about Himself being the focus of Passover sounded to first-century Jews.

All these NEWs - and so much more - points to the way of Jesus being far more than a refreshed Judaism. It is something else entirely.

---

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew 26:26ff...; Mark 14:22-25.

## **A Radically Different NEW**

### **“Judaism 2.0” - NO!**

Now, of course, Jesus was a Jew.

He was born Jewish and raised in a Jewish family and culture and community. He would have spoken Aramaic as the Jews did and would have been able to at least read Hebrew.

But so much of what Jesus said and did pointed to a departure from Judaism.

His Way was going to be so different from Judaism that it couldn't be mixed. There was more discontinuity between the Moses-centric Jewish way and Jesus than there was continuity.

But there was and is continuity between the way of Jesus and something else older and deeper than the way of Moses.

There was perfect continuity between the pre-Moses Way of Abraham and the NEW Jesus brought to the world.

### **“Abraham (cont'd)” - YES!**

#### *The covenants of Abraham and Moses*

Now, I'm about to try something tricky. I want to summarize a lot of the history of God's work in the world, history that is important for us all to understand, briefly. So, again, hang on to your couch cushions.

All the way back at about 2,000 BC (Genesis 12), God entered into a covenant relationship with a seventy-five-year-old man named Abram (later, Abraham).

This relationship between God and Abraham was different than the covenant God entered into with Israel five hundred years later at Mount Sinai.

The arrangement with Israel was what we refer to as a *bilateral* covenant where God obligated Himself to do certain things for Israel as long as Israel lived as God told them to live. (It's like a modern-day covenant/treaty between nations.)

If Israel disobeyed God, God would not bless, but would bring judgment on them.

With Abraham, God made a *unilateral* covenant. God promised Abraham that He was going to do certain things for him. Period. Regardless of Abraham's obedience to God.

Here is the promise.

***[Genesis 12:2]...I will make you a great nation,  
And I will bless you,  
And make your name great;  
And so you shall be a blessing;  
[3] And I will bless those who bless you,  
And the one who curses you I will curse.  
And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”***

The promise to Abraham was that from a child he and his wife, Sarah, did not yet have, would come a nation from which would come blessing to the whole world.

OK. So, Abraham and Sarah miraculously had a son, Isaac. Isaac and his wife, Rebekah, had a son named Jacob who had twelve sons who became the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Because of a famine in their land (Canaan/Palestine), they all went to Egypt to survive, but ended up being enslaved for four centuries.

God set them free in the days of Moses and led them out of Egypt through the Red Sea.

They made their way to Mount Sinai where God made this *bilateral* covenant with Israel, an “I'll do great things for you if You obey Me” treaty.

Over the next eight or nine centuries, while living under the Mosaic Covenant, the nation of Israel was ruled by judges and kings.

There were times of submission to God and times of rebellion, times of blessings and times of punishment and discipline from God.

Eventually, Israel rebelled so thoroughly against God that He sent crushing discipline against them, sending the northern tribes of Israel to destruction by the Assyrian Empire and by later sending the southern tribes of Judah to destruction by the Babylonian Empire.

The Mosaic Covenant was still in effect. Israel was suffering the effects of her rebellion against God.

And at the same time, the covenant God had made with Abraham was also still in effect, operating in the background, because with Abraham, God had made a *unilateral*, "I will do this thing" covenant. Period.

Well, God brought the Jews back to Palestine from Babylonian captivity where they re-established themselves as a nation.

Finally, five hundred years after their return, living under Roman domination, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham with the birth of a Child, Jesus, to a woman named Mary.

This was the child that came from the nation that came from Abraham and Sarah from whom blessing would come to the world.

The nation of Israel was a vital means to a glorious end. And that "end" was Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

The point for God from the very beginning was to bless a world broken by sin. He loved the world - the whole world! - so much that He made Israel His chosen instrument to accomplish this great mission.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Stanley, quoting biblical scholar NT Wright - "*The Torah [law of Moses at Sinai] is given for a specific period of time, and is then set aside -- not because it was a bad thing now happily abolished, but because it was a good thing whose purpose had now been accomplished*" (*Irresistible*, p. 170).

And now Jesus is working to fulfill the covenant God made with Abraham by blessing the world.

*Jesus' great, last, NEW covenant*

In these days, our days, God is not working through Israel to accomplish His work of blessing the world. He's working through the NEW Jesus has brought.

The NEW Jesus has brought is a new community, a new covenant and a new ethic.

The new ethic is the way of love. The old way of Moses consisted of six hundred and thirteen commands, rules and laws that regulated every aspect of Jewish life. Jesus' Way is all about bold, courageous, and sacrificial love.

The prophet Jeremiah had spoken of a New Covenant - one that would replace the Mosaic Covenant - long before Jesus was born.

This New Covenant consists of the active work of the Spirit in the life of each one who believes in Jesus. The Jesus Way is for God to dwell in all His people, not in a tabernacle or in a temple.

And the new community is the global, group entity God will use to bless and redeem and love the world.

Jesus referred to this community by the Greek word *ekklesia*. By and large, God does what He does today through this *ekklesia*.

And, it is to a consideration of this *ekklesia* that we will now turn.

---

<sup>8</sup> Israel was to have been a light to the nations, but she failed in this stewardship. So, God set Israel aside (specifically, in AD 70 when Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome; see Jesus' prediction of this in Luke 21:10-24) I believe that the best way to read the Bible's story is to say that God is not finished with Israel. But He is not currently fulfilling His plan to bless the world through Israel.

## **Ekklesia**

### **The New Community**

#### *Acts*

A basic principle in studying foreign languages is that if you truly want to understand a word, you need to see it used in different settings and contexts.

The Greek word *ekklesia* occurs in the New Testament over one hundred times. It is usually translated by the English word “church”, but there are exceptions. Those exceptions help us get to the essential meaning of the word.

We find the most notable of these exceptions in Acts 19 where Paul had been preaching the Gospel of Jesus in the city of Ephesus.

There was pushback against the message because so many people were believing in Jesus that the idol-making business was going bust. There was the threat of a riot.

Here’s how Luke described the scene.

***[Acts 19:32] So then, some were shouting one thing and some another, for the assembly was in confusion and the majority did not know for what reason they had come together.***

The word “**assembly**” in that verse is our word *ekklesia*. But it obviously doesn’t refer to a church. Luke, the author of Acts, describes a lawless assembly united in their desire to harm Paul.

See, in the Greek language of the day, *ekklesia* wasn’t a religious term at all. It was a word used to describe any group of people united in purpose. Any purpose, good or bad, secular or sacred.<sup>9</sup>

That, at the core, is what *ekklesia* means. A group of people who are united in a purpose.

---

<sup>9</sup> This is validated by every dictionary of Greek words you might consult.

Now keep that in mind as we see the first time *ekklesia* occurs in the Gospel of Matthew.

### **Matthew 16**

This scene takes place in Caesarea Philippi, an area to the north of Palestine. Jesus was with His disciples and He wanted to know what people were saying about Him.

They answered, ***[Matthew 16:14]...“Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”***

Then, Jesus asked another question.

***[15] He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”***

To which Simon Peter (of course) responded, ***[16]...“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”***

Now, listen carefully to what Jesus says next.

***[17] And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” [18] “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build<sup>10</sup> My CHURCH (ekklesia); and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.”***

Upon this “**rock**” (Peter’s confession of who Jesus really and truly is), He will build His *ekklesia*.<sup>11</sup> The group of people who are all about Jesus is His *ekklesia*.

When we read this in English and hear *church*, we may sort of instinctively think of a church building. That wasn’t on Jesus’ radar.

---

<sup>10</sup> As of Peter’s confession Jesus had not built what He would build. “***I will build...***” “Construction” would begin AFTER His resurrection, at Pentecost.

<sup>11</sup> In Greek, the name *Peter* is related to the word for *rock*. So, Jesus did not mean that the *ekklesia* would be built on Peter, but on what Peter had just said. His confession that Jesus was “***the Christ, the Son of the living God***” was the ROCK.

He wasn't predicting a new house or a temple for the Lord in any sense. God was through with temples.<sup>12</sup>

He was talking about us. It's not about location, but purpose.

Think of it like Air Force One, the president's plane.

As you've probably also heard, Air Force One is the call sign for whatever aircraft the President of the United States happens to be on. Multi-billion dollar 747 or single engine Cessna. Air Force One is wherever the President is.

The church, the *ekklesia*, of Jesus is wherever we happen to be.

And the first *ekklesia* that was united in one purpose around Jesus was distinct in what it did and in what it did not do.

Let's think, first, about what the first *ekklesia* in Jerusalem did not do.

### **Ekklesia in Action**

#### **"No" to...**

In the book of Acts, the first followers of Jesus had no priesthood. Sure, there were men and women who led things, but they didn't create their own special caste of people who spoke to God on their behalf.

There were no sacrifices. Most religious groups of that day practiced some sort of sacrificial system. Not the *ekklesia* of Jesus. Sacrifices weren't necessary because Jesus was the once-and-for-all sacrifice for their sins.

And, Jesus' *ekklesia* wasn't building-centric. They were mobile, itinerant, portable.

Sometimes, we see them in the temple. But they also met in homes, and later by rivers or in the schoolhouses of pagan philosophers.

Jesus' *ekklesia* wasn't about priests, sacrifices, or buildings. What they were all about was community and mission.

#### **"Yes" to...**

##### *...Community*

On the Day of Pentecost, three thousand souls were added to the *ekklesia*.

***[Acts 2:42] They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***

Together, they...

...all learned about Jesus from the eye-witness teaching of the apostles.  
 ...met needs as they arose (the true meaning of *koinonia*).  
 ...shared meals, built relationships, went deep with each other.  
 ...prayed, as they walked through life together, wherever they went, at the drop of a hat.

They were all about community. Then, read through the first several chapters of Acts and you'll see people on mission.

##### *...Mission*

They shared their possessions with each other AND they shared Jesus with those outside so that more and more people were coming to faith, daily.

After apostles were imprisoned, they prayed NOT for safety and protection, but for boldness in proclamation.

They depended on God to do what only He could do - touch hearts, convict people of truth, heal bodies - while they faithfully spoke out about their Lord in Jerusalem.

---

<sup>12</sup> The word "church" derives from the German word "kirche" which did speak of a church building.



And even after being beaten for their witness, *[Acts 5:41] they went on their way from the presence of the Council, rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name. [42] And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ.*

That's Jesus' ekklesia. A group of people united in purpose, experiencing Christ-centered community and moving out in Christ-centered mission.

### **Conclusion:**

When I was a kid, I learned a poem/song with two verses that many children still learn, complete with hand motions.

Here's the church  
Here's the steeple  
Open the doors  
And where are the people?

Here's the church  
Here's the steeple  
Open the doors  
And HERE are the people!

And what I learned from that song was that the church of Jesus was a building where people gathered.

The New Testament tells a different story, and that's why I see us considering Jesus' ekklesia while separated from each other as being pretty appropriate.

As much as I love our gatherings and as much as I am eager to re-gather on Sundays with you, we are no less Jesus' ekklesia / church today than we were back in January or than we will be when we're together.

The church is not a building. It is us, together, for Jesus. In community. On mission.

Friends, in these unusual times, keep your eyes peeled for creative ways to be on mission for Jesus. Meet needs that you can meet. Talk about Jesus, the hope of the world.

And take initiative and take advantage of every opportunity you can grab to experience Christ-centered community with others who are also a part of The Way.

In this season of extreme disruption, be the church.