I was once in a very bizarre argument. Truth be told I have been in a lot of bizarre arguments but this one was fairly recent and so I unfortunately still remember it. I won’t bore you with the details but part of the argument centered on church attendance in relationship to someone’s claim of being a Christian. I did not take a hardline stance but did suggest that part of being Christian was gathering together, i.e., going to church. The person I was talking with shot back and said that was not true at all, in fact some of the best Christians he knew did not go to church at all because they found that the people who went to church were not hardcore enough. I did not really get into his definition of hardcore but was more fascinated by the belief that Christianity could be practiced independently of the body of believers. Somehow when Jesus said “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” he really meant to say one, as long as they were “hardcore.” This is not to suggest that you can never be alone and be a Christian, but rather to point out that gathering is part of being a Christian. Being hardcore, whatever that means, is not a substitute for all of the various and sundry parts of our faith. Being a Christian, just like being a parent or a plumber does not consist of just doing one thing. And if you don’t believe me, know that this is a pattern that is laid out for us in scripture.

Just take a moment and look at our passage today from Luke. It begins by saying, “Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea.” It starts with a bunch of people gathered. It then says, “They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases.” So they are gathered and now they want to hear and they want a change to occur. The section of scripture ends by noting a very human thing saying, “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him.” There was a connection that needed to take place beyond hearing some words, getting some stuff or just being in the same place. In this very short passage, you get a whole host of things that people do when they have faith in Jesus – they gather, they hear, they are healed, touched and so on.

I don’t think it is all Martin Luther’s fault that people limit what Christianity is, but it is fun to blame the Lutherans for all the world’s problems. Part of the reason I am singling out Luther as an offender is because of his promotion of the idea of *sola fide*, that is our salvation is dependent on nothing other than faith alone. And while I know Luther’s understanding was more nuanced the way this idea often gets played out is in the belief that our salvation is a private thing and something that is strictly between the individual and God. And when pushed to its extreme you get people defending the “hardcore” Christians who deliberately avoid other Christians so as to ensure that their core does not get flabby. But as today’s Gospel testifies Christianity is not lived in isolation and takes on many of the attributes and characteristics of our life on earth. Christianity, in other words, is not something that takes place apart from the world but very much takes place in the world and engages all of our senses and all of our being.

Now I don’t want to be one of those people that reads a passage of scripture and forms an entire theology out of it like Charles Manson did with the Beatle’s *Helter Skelter*, but I do want to point something out. Look at the order of how things happen. The people came, they interacted, they touched, they were healed and then it was only after all of that Jesus started preaching. I won’t say that this is a judgement on preaching’s importance but rather say that it serves as a good reminder that church and being Christian is not just about preaching the word as your Baptist friends might say. If you pay much attention to famous heresies (and who doesn’t) you might notice that most of them come from pushing something too far. Most often these heretical pushings comes in the context of Jesus’ divinity and Jesus’ humanity. Heresies either make Jesus too human to the exclusion of his divinity or too divine to the exclusion of his humanity. I think something similar can happen in the church and in the life of a Christian in general. We can take one part of Christianity and say it is the most essential and then not worry so much about the other parts. Just for a few examples: In some church services the sermon occupies about two thirds of the time allotted and there are no sacraments. Conversely, I have been to some churches where there is no sermon but there is Eucharist. If you go to some churches’ websites you might observe that they see their mission as healing the world or stamping out injustice. If you ask most secular people, or at least infer their views by how they live their lives, they will say that the church exists mainly to do a nice service on Christmas Eve or Easter morning. And here is the thing, none of those are necessarily bad things or even unchristian things but when pushed too far they make for an incomplete church. Yes, certainly we need preaching, we need sacraments, we need to be out in the world but none of those can be done to the exclusion of the others. This small snippet from Jesus and the Disciples this morning shows lots of different ways in which people live their faith. This may sound a little strange to say but Christianity is a lifestyle. It is made up of faith, gathering, the sacraments, changing the world, changing ourselves, going to Christmas Eve services and many many other things.

Just to throw out a question: What was the worst part of being a Christian at St. John Chrysostom when Bishop Miller forced us to shut down in March of 2020? You might have different answers than me but, in my mind, it was the things that could not be replaced by a video screen. Some churches boasted about their Zoom coffee hour, but come on. A Zoom coffee hour is to a real coffee hour what watching a rerun of *Laverne and Shirley* is to living in Milwaukee. It simply isn’t the same thing. Technically on a broadcast you could see a service, you could hear a sermon but it was nowhere close to the actual thing. We were not surrounded by actual people. We did not physically touch the sacraments or move about freely in sacred space. If Christianity were simply something that involved us thinking proper thoughts about God, then Zoom church probably could have met all our needs. In fact, it probably could do it more efficiently, but I assume you are like me and found it all rather lacking, like hearing only the tuba section in a symphony orchestra. The life of Jesus in his time on this earth was a testimony to our faith being lived out in all places and at all times. Jesus went to wedding feasts, he got into boats, he went to the synagogue, he got water from wells, he healed people, he instituted the Eucharist and so much more. Christianity is not one thing but is a beautiful and strange combination of so many things. And while the scriptures are silent on whether or not Jesus attended the annual meeting, I think it is something that is part of our faith as well. And so, on this Sunday as we elect new vestry members and review the finances know that this is not somehow separate of our faith but is part of it too. We worship a God who is not confined to a time and place but can be with us through all things so that we may be his, this day and forevermore.