

Church Today
Being Church Together

We began this series of messages several weeks ago by asking “Why Church?” It’s an important question for any Christian congregation (and denomination). It’s vitally important to know your “why.” Why bother reviving a dying church? Why try to impact a secular and broken world? Why is it worth the expenditure and risk? Why should I come to church? Why become a church member?

Now, I’ve noted that there is a yearning in the human heart for something (dare I say Someone) greater than self. **People** – at some level, at some point in their lives - **yearn for meaning and purpose**, and for true community. Though denied by many, it’s really a search for God, and the truth about God. The Church is the only body that carries the life-giving truth of God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ.

Last week we considered some of the causes of disunity in Church and churches. We should know by now that the Church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners - people who know they need God. **The Church is the gathering of forgiven sinners who want to know and serve God.**

The outsider (and some insiders) almost always judges what the Church is by what the Church ought to be. It would be great he thinks to have an all-embracing fellowship, or a society concerned with injustice and working to right things. **In essence the critic of the Church complains that it is not heaven on earth.** Of course he is right. “The church is something like Noah’s ark. If it weren’t for the storm outside, you couldn’t stand the smell inside,” (from a late medieval manuscript).

When I look at the shortcomings of the Church, I can’t just say, ‘Oh, that’s those people over there; it’s their fault. I have to say (and who wants to say this?), ‘It’s my fault.’ Most of us would probably rather just do our own thing and not be bothered. In answer to the question “What is wrong with the world?” British writer G. K. Chesterton wrote “I am.” How would you answer?

But here’s the difference that those in the church bring: the outsider is saying, in effect, ‘I won’t go near the church until it’s perfect, or at least is a whole lot better.’ The insider, on the other hand, says, ‘I’ve got to be involved in getting better myself. I may not be perfect but my life needs to be headed in that direction. So, I’ll join others who headed toward Christ.’ **For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? I Peter 4:17.**

So where does this consideration about the Church leave us? What would Jesus say if He came into church today? Maybe he would decry our material wealth while others around the globe or close to home live in poverty. That’s a popular notion. Maybe he’d admonish us about how we used our resources – warning us to be better stewards of all that’s been given us. That’s another popular notion. Maybe He would comfort us where we are hurting and then encourage us to be more loving, and kind, and not so judgmental. That’s a very popular notion.

Or perhaps He would ask us why we are not doing what He told us to do. Perhaps He would ask us why we are not doing the three “C’s” He gave us: The Great Commandment, the Great Compassion, and the Great Commission. Let’s consider...

1. The Great Commandment

Jesus was once asked what was the greatest commandment from God on how we should live. *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and with all your strength,’ Mark 12:29-30.*

This is where passion and enthusiasm for the Christian life comes from. It’s in a heart – the human will - that has been surrendered to Christ. Call the experience what you will: “born again” (see John 3); or the spirit of adoption as sons and daughters of God (see Romans 8); or the new and transformed life in Christ; or as John Wesley said (May 24, 1738) described, “I felt my heart strangely warmed.” Love God with all your heart is the humble confession that He is holy and worthy, and although you are unholy and unworthy, He has forgiven and chosen you because of Jesus Christ.

Jesus told a story ... maybe you can see yourself in this story ... Here’s the context: *When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table. A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”*

Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.” Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace,” Luke 7:36-50.

When you know deep down that you’ve been forgiven much ... you are able to love God much. And then the joy comes. If the joy of the Lord is missing in your life, in our

life together, maybe we're not attending to God as much as we are to ourselves, and all our issues. BTW "If you know Jesus in your heart, don't forget to tell your face."

What do you think? Are you obeying Jesus on this commandment? Is our congregation loving God with all our heart? Jesus said *...whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life,* John 4:14. It's a joy welling up in your life that bubbles out. ***For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,* Rom. 14:17.**

When the strife is fierce, or you are disappointed in church, return to the Lord praying: ***Restore to me the joy of your salvation, And grant to me a willing spirit, to sustain me,* Psalm 51:12.**

Additionally, the Great Commandment tells us to love the Lord your God with all of ***your mind,*** as well as your heart and soul. The enthusiasm that springs from a heart of love for God, will include a mind that is willing to learn from Scripture and church history. Without this kind of discipleship, the joy of the Lord may fade when you run up against problems and challenges. Minds rightly focused ensure that actions are in concert with the gospel and Jesus' commands. ***Test me, LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind,* Psalm 26:2.** It is good to think strategically for the Kingdom of God.

2. The Great Compassion

This is really the second half of the Great Commandment. Jesus said: *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'* ***There is no commandment greater than these.*** "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices," **Mark 12:31-33.** Compassion begins in the family of God. ***If we can't love one another our love of God is insincere.*** We all know this and most of the time think ourselves to be doing okay on this one. But we can always use reminders. Yet loving like Jesus doesn't stay at Church.

Jesus said, ***If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect,* Matt. 5:46-48.**

These days, with social media enveloping communications, it is easier than ever for people to appear compassionate and caring. Just send out a tweet, or post a meme or video on FB or Instagram or Tik Tok, showing how you identify with the right and good. But virtue signaling won't do in church. Love is action, not simply words. ***We must put our money and our body where our mouth is.***

We have our food pantry, we've collected hygiene kits for foster youth, books and supplies for school children, dollars for disaster relief and rescuing Middle East Christians, we've significantly aided the Mission at Kern, and the Bakersfield Pregnancy Center. Did you know that this congregation has "tithed" from the various bequests we've received over the years? Our Adm. Council has voted numerous times to give 10% of the monies with which God has blessed us, to Christian ministries in our community. We can do that without worry because we trust God and because you all

give regularly so that our weekly church life can continue. How about your personal finances ... could you trust God like that? Through our small groups we've done hands-on service projects –serving for God through helping others. It's time we got back into that, now that COVID is waning.

I think our greatest challenge is making connections with people – especially those who are younger than most of us. They have needs too. The early Methodists founded schools and workshops to lift people out of poverty and redeem them for Jesus. We carry the wonderful and hopeful message that people don't have to be successful, educated, perfect to know the love of God and that their lives can improve and that they can be a great asset to God and this society. Traits connected with a strong work ethic, team work, and reaching outside the church to those in need, all find their roots in the Great Compassion.

3. The Great Commission

Here's where the Great Commission comes in. **Because God so loved the world, Jesus commanded His disciples to go out to people. Jesus said: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, Matt. 28:19-20.***

These are His last words on earth and so perhaps the most important thing He ever said to His disciples. For two thousand years the words that Jesus said to His disciples that day have been read and memorized and pondered and applied and obeyed and discussed by Christians of every group, sect, organization and denomination.

Nevertheless, those words of Jesus were the charter and a blueprint for the movement that His followers established – the Church. His words continue to tell us what we're supposed to be doing during this period between His first coming and His second coming. **We are to be disciple-making Christians and a disciple-making church.** If Jesus came to church today, would He ask us how we're doing at making disciples? Might He ask, don't you know that I said "go and make disciples"?

Let's take note that on the front side of the Great Commission Jesus said, ***All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...* Matt. 28:18.** He can send us because He has all authority. Because of who He is – King of kings and Lord of lords - and what He has accomplished – victory over sin and death by His resurrection - we can take His gospel to every nation and know that we will be protected as we do so. Are we hesitant to make disciples because of skepticism, indifference, or opposition? **The Evil One always wants us to shrink from following Jesus' command. Lean on Jesus, He has authority over even Satan, and all the forces of darkness.** It's really just a matter of being able to say how Jesus has made a difference in your life and making friends for Jesus' sake. We needn't be afraid, He's always there for us. *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age,* Matt. 28:20. Each time you share the gospel - He'll be with you – backing you up - until He returns to earth at the end of time. Have confidence. ... How committed are we? How committed am I?

Remember that old movie "Field of Dreams" starring Kevin Costner? (1989). There's that iconic line: "If you build it, they will come." Well, when it comes to church it just isn't so. We make a big mistake if we think we can convert the world just by staying

here, being good to one another, and fixing our buildings. **If we don't go they won't come.** For a congregation – for each Christian - to go outside the walls of church to reach a people they do not know, for a result they might not see, at the risk of being turned down, they have to be absolutely committed to the Great Commission. What would Jesus say to us if He came to our church today? How committed are we? Our vision for the future of FUMC – all the building efforts will be for naught if we cannot share the gospel with those who do not yet know Jesus. Who among us is willing to share Jesus with someone outside these walls?

True Church Begins Here

This all-too-human institution that fails so often because it is full of fallible human beings, this church, is still worth believing in because God is involved. **Church belongs to our Heavenly Father, and if we are in the real Church, we belong to Him too.** We cannot promote a church where people think, “What is the least I can do to be a Christian, or a church member?” Jesus invites each one of us to follow Him asking “what more can I do?” That takes conviction and commitment.

Never let the foolish or faithless acts of others keep us from doing what Christians have done across the centuries: be the real Church. Jesus said: ***Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in...*** Rev. 3:20. Those words were not directed at an unbeliever with whom Jesus is pleading. Nope. They were directed to a congregation ... like us. Can we open the door and let Him come in? Will He find us obeying His commands?

So then, let us... not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching, Heb. 10:25.