

**Matthew 16:16-18**  
**Col. 1:17-20, 24-25**

Feb. 7, 2021

### **LIFE-GIVERS: CHURCH**

*The Lent Experience - small groups - life-giving members*

Last week we began a series of messages on “Life-Givers” and I spoke about how important it is to have life-giving relationships. We considered the value of friends.

Reading **Eccl. 4:9-12** we saw that a **life-giving friend** is one who:

- 1. Helps You When You're Down.**
- 2. Provides Emotional Or Physical Warmth In A Cold World.**
- 3. Will Fight To Protect You Or Your Reputation.**
- 4. Is Committed To Helping You Grow Spiritually**

I was informed by my son that he thinks many millennials don't have friends like that. Is that due to vast amounts of time people spend on digital communication, rather than shared experiences? Is it due to young people just not having the same opportunities to develop friendships? Not sure. But I am sure that genuine friendship is necessary to healthy and truthful living. The truest friend we can have, and the model for all good and genuine friendships, is Jesus. He said, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). He also said, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Because he rose from the dead, He lives today and will be our eternal Friend. He is the supreme life-giver.

Many of the same characteristics that make for life-giving friends also apply to churches. But the church is more than a collection of relationships.

### **Purpose of Church**

What makes for a life-giving church? Most of us could give an answer to that question. But would our answers express something of the true purpose of church? Or would they encapsulate our own desires for how we'd like church to be? We must continually ask ourselves these tough questions as we seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Those questions get at the heart of what it means to be the church.

Over the years I've observed that people hold to a variety of notions of what church is supposed to be:

**1. Care Of Church Members.** Some say, or expect, or act as if, a true, life giving church is one that above all cares for the church members. This was a concern for the early church. Acts 6:1-4 tells how the early church ensured that the needy among them – especially widows and orphans - were taken care of. ***Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world, James 1:27.*** The downside is this: when this view becomes the predominant purpose of church, members come to expect the church and staff to be their chaplain and on-call comforter, while missing the greater purposes of God.

**2. Helping The Poor.** In one church where I served there was a woman who seemed to believe that the church's primary purpose was to gather food and clothing for the poor and homeless. A worthy endeavor, yes. Since Old Testament times that's been true: ***He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord, Jeremiah 22:16.*** This concept of charity originally applied to those poor who were part of God's covenant community. These days churches have

expanded the concern to the poor of the entire community. We remember Jesus' words, ***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, Luke 4:18 (Isaiah 61:1).***

A concern for the poor is biblical and part of our Methodist tradition. However, the true church also looks for opportunities to help the poor improve their lot. Sure, we can fill hungry stomachs, but we must also be prepared to fill hungry spirits.

**3. Social Justice Causes.** Some Christians and congregations act as though their greatest purpose is to advocate for "social justice." Doesn't Scripture say, ***...let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream? Amos 5:24.*** The downside: churches can be so wrapped up in "social justice" that they forget the gospel and become just partisan political groups. Our Methodist tradition advocated for reforms in law and society, while helping individuals improve their lives. John Wesley said, "We proclaim no personal gospel that fails to express itself in relevant social concerns; we proclaim no social gospel that does not include the personal transformation of sinners." That last part is crucial because justice is really experienced by individuals, each of whom God loves, and wants to redeem from sin. A life-giving church knows and practices this truth: our only real cause is Jesus Christ and new life in Him. ***For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel... 1 Cor. 1:17.***

### **Life-Giving Church**

Here's an alternative to those other purposes for church: ***One Message, One Mission.*** A life-giving church is one that proclaims one message and continues on one mission. Among His disciples Jesus asked, ***Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."***

***Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter [meaning rock], and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it, Matt. 16:13, 16-18.***

**One message: Jesus is the Son of God.** As St. Paul said, ***For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified, 1 Corinthians 2:2.*** In Jesus Christ we can know God's purpose for creation and human destiny. These days we face an increasingly skeptical culture ... unsure there is a God, at least a God who is involved in our lives or the God of the Bible; it is still hard for many to grasp that God became incarnate in Jesus ... and all the implications of that true, historical event. These days we face directed opposition from those in politics, government, big business, and tech giants that see religion as a rival to their designs for control of people.

Yet the truth of Christ endures because in the fullness of time God did indeed send His Son, who knowingly died on the Cross for our sake, and then did actually rise from the tomb. The message of Christ is as true today as it was when the apostles testified to the events they saw. Countless human lives have withered like grass and blown away, but those who believe in Christ – the Church - have stood fast in all storms and trials on the rock of their salvation: ***And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven, Matt. 26:64.***

**Our one mission was given by Christ Himself:** Then Jesus came to them and said, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you, **Matt. 28:18-20.***

### **Life Giving Traits**

A good church will care for its members, help the poor, and work for justice. A life-giving church will do those things yet have as its primary mission these things:

**1. Proclaim the one message and live the one mission.** At First Church our mission statement says: "To bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ through membership in his family and to equip the members for ministry in the church and the world." Did you catch the first phrase? "To bring people to the transforming power of Jesus Christ... For our young families this will be more crucial than ever as we raise children in a rapidly changing culture. *Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence, I Peter 3:15.*

**2. Recognize the authority of Scripture in matters of faith.** "Every doctrine must stand or fall by the Bible," said John Wesley. A highly educated man he nevertheless called himself "a man of one book" - the Bible. He said, "It is dangerous to depart from Scripture ... most of the controversies which have disturbed the Church have arisen from people's wanting to be wise above what is written, not contented with what God has plainly revealed there." [See II Timothy 3:15-16.] **Study the Bible!**

**3. Teach the love of God in Jesus Christ.** *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life, John 3:16.* People need to know that God loves them in spite of their sin and has provided a way out of sin. Beginning with little children, this is a message begging to be heard.

**4. Encourage personal commitment to Jesus.** *Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved, Acts 2:21.* A personal relationship with Jesus is essential to a life-giving church filled with life-givers. *... we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, Galatians 2:16.* (See also Rom. 3:21-24).

**5. Spirit-led living.** Jesus said: *I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing, John 15:5.* To be life-givers we must remain, individually and together, connected to the Source of life. A life-giving church and life-giving members ask "How can I use what I have to help the church fulfill God's purpose for us?" Life draining churches and members ask, "How can I use what I have to get my way?"

Spiritually reborn people, relying on the Holy Spirit will begin to see the world from God's perspective. Our challenge is **always to read Scripture in a way that helps us "read" our culture.** We don't want to be like the frog in the kettle who doesn't notice how the water is gradually heating up and then when it's boiling it's too late. I think we're very close to that now. We live in times where there is a constant cascade of information, much of it trivial, and smothering the truth. Many are ensnared by the

latest headlines, for there is a worldly wisdom that aligns with the loudest voices, instead of God's Truth. In times of trouble, the loudest voices can often lead us away from seeking the Truth; while God speaks in whispers. The life-giving church must discern the voice of God so that it can be a thermostat, rather than a thermometer of culture.

### **Life Giving Church Members**

Churches are life-draining when members do not experience the grace of Christ in their lives and so cannot offer grace to those around them. Churches decay when people cling to their picture of church rather than cling to Christ Himself. Churches die when they forget their true purpose. *... in Him [Christ] all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church...* Col. 1:17-18.

Think about when you gave of yourself to help someone here, or to help the whole church, or to share faith in Christ. That's what a life-giver does. Ask yourself, "If every member was like me, what kind of church would we have?"

The church founded on Jesus Christ, connected to Him as a branch to the vine, and continually feeding on the Scriptures, will produce life-giving church members and that makes for a life-giving church. It's summed up so well in this prayer of hope: *May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Rom. 15:5-6.* [See also Eph. 4:29; Heb. 10:24-25; I Peter 3:8; Gal. 6:10; Heb. 2:10-12; I Peter 4:17]