

Isaiah 12:2-5; Psalm 22:27-31

Nov. 18 2018

Ephesians 3:12, 14-21

Placed Here On Purpose We Are Church

The church has a purpose. *“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known...”* Eph. 3:10. For several weeks we’ve been focused on what it means to be a church. We’ve not talked so much about programs, activities, or organization. Rather, we’ve placed the emphasis on the source of the church, beginning with that confession of faith that St. Peter made long ago: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”* It is upon this truth that Jesus has built His church. We are church when we are united by our confession that Jesus is the divine One, come from God to save us from our fallen, corrupted, sinful, human predicament.

A Special Community

The Church is community in a very special sense. It’s not a voluntary gathering of people who think it’s a good idea to get together now and then. It’s not a group of activists gathered around a cause, bent on reshaping society (although authentic Christianity will indeed shape a society); it’s not a social service agency (although the Church has helped and continues to help those in need materially and spiritually); neither is it a rally for community organizers, self-help devotees, music performances, or celebrity speakers.

The authentic Christian church is a community called into existence by Jesus, and dependent upon Him for its very life and energy. It is composed of those individuals who have found their true identity in Christ Jesus, as new creations no longer beholden to sinful desires and passions. My orientation may be one thing, and I may be drawn to pleasures and pursuits so common to this world. But my real identity is in Christ who draws me to pursuits of His purposes and shapes my character for eternal significance. *“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do,”* Eph. 2:10. How about you? Can you say, “I am a one of a kind masterpiece, being made perfect through Christ, for God’s grand and everlasting purposes?” The Church is composed of those who belong to Christ and therefore belong to a project much greater than themselves – nothing short of the salvation of all humanity.

We are church created by Jesus for divine purposes. He is the Head of the Church, not a bishop, or a pope, or a District Superintendent, or a pastor, or even the congregation or it’s church council. For, *“... God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church,”* Ephesians 1:22. This simple truth, and whether we follow it or not, has the most significant

impact on whether or not we as the church can bear much fruit, as Jesus promised.

Those who love the Church, do so despite all its failures and foibles because it is the Lord's creation and workshop. They love it because the Church has power in their lives. The Church *has* been a community of grace, a place where men and women have come to know God's love, and have been given power to love others. The Church *has* been the place where the barriers of race and nation and color have been overcome – and this happens when we focus on our genuine shared faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The Church *has* been the place where many people have discovered that “all are one in Christ Jesus” and that in Him “there is no East or West.” The Church *has* been the place where men and women have experienced what it is to be forgiven, and not only that, have learned what it is to forgive. And where forgiveness is real, no limits can be placed upon the creative power that will be unleashed.

Vessel of the Lord

As His own creation, Jesus has made the church His premier mode for extending God's kingdom.

1) Vessel of the Gospel: Two weeks ago I referred to the church as a vessel for carrying Jesus, who is the gospel of God ... the good news that God has not despaired of us despite our messed up lives and world. Jesus is the message; the message that we need a Savior who can redeem us from a life of sin and that Jesus is the One who came from God to forgive us and redeem us with his atoning sacrifice on the cross. This message is the church's most precious cargo. The Church is the only organization on earth that carries the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Please be aware, this truth is bad news before it is good news. The gospel message doesn't make people feel better just as they are. It carries the message that God is good, yes, and that God loves you, sure. But the gospel is really about starting again, being changed, and a number of other inconvenient things, all of which demand admitting that you're not so great the way you are. That's the real reason people are often offended by the Church, or avoid Church – because its message is bound to offend as well as to heal. Poet T. S. Eliot said it in his poem, “The Rock”:

“Why should men love the Church?

Why should they love her laws?

**She tells them of Life and Death, and
of all that they would forget.**

**She is tender where they would be hard,
and hard where they like to be
soft.**

She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.

2) Vessel of the Holy Spirit: St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth (Greece): *“Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”* The Church is the repository of the Holy Spirit, the continuing presence of Jesus Christ. That is why we sometimes refer to church as the Body of Christ – for it is intended to be the people who live by and are guided by the Spirit of God, just as Jesus was when He walked this earth. Jesus promised the Holy Spirit to the church, not just to give us comfort when we are hurt and lonely, but to give us power to be who are intended to be as new creations in Him.

A New Man and A New Woman

I said earlier the church is composed of those people who are finding their true identity in Christ Jesus. I also said the church is Jesus’ workshop and that’s because the church is where He is shaping the new man and the new woman. The first couple – Adam and Eve – disobeyed God and thereby allowed sin and brokenness and its inherent pain and suffering to enter into human life. Jesus is the new, sinless man who offers to take away our sin so that we can begin the journey back to God’s original goodness. *“For as in Adam all die so in Christ all will be made alive,”* 1 Cor. 15:22. The church, His Body, the repository of the Holy Spirit, is His workplace for reshaping our character to match our identity in Him. *“So it is written: The first man Adam became a living being; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit,”* 1 Cor. 15:45.

Jesus does not seek to extinguish your personality, your uniqueness – you are a one of a kind masterpiece. He only seeks to shape you to be a true “chip off the old block,” to be recognizable as God’s own child. No person can achieve all that God has in mind for him or her when they exist outside a local church body. *“A coal removed from the fire soon grows cold.”* Despite our many foibles each of us only becomes the best version of ourselves, the most clear representation of Jesus, living the most sanctified lives, and expressing the fullness of what God has placed into our hearts ... together. The church is where we help one another, in the power of the Holy Spirit, *“... to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness,”* Ephesians 4:24.

One critic of the church said, “I would be more likely to believe in your savior if you looked more like him.” And it’s a legitimate criticism because, “The Church is both holy and sinful. This is the fundamental root of the whole problem of the Church, that it is a union of sinful souls with the Holy God,” says Anglican Bishop Lesslie Newbigin. The Church is peopled with those who are “being saved;” redeemed, while still struggling to put off the old sinful nature for the new nature of our Savior. Let’s also remember that: “The power of hell is strongest where the odor of sanctity fills the air” (Saint Hereticus).

Last week my cousin and his wife visited us for a couple days. He gave me this card that their pastor (from a little church in the Ozark Mountains of

southern Missouri) gave them. It says, “Live in such a way that those who know you but don’t know God, will come to know God because they know you.” The only introduction to God and His great saving grace in Jesus that someone may get might be you. The only Bible some people may read could be you.

Friends let us not be naïve, there is an evil one who wages war against God and His people, and will continue until the end of time (read the book of Revelation). If Satan tempted and battled Jesus, there is no reason to think he won’t tempt and battle Jesus’ followers. Yet, we have this promise in Jesus: *“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it,”* Matthew 16:18.

Poured Out

Jesus is using the church to tell others of the great truth of His life-giving grace and power. The warmth of relationship and belonging that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is ours to share in and to share out. Unlike the Dead Sea, we are not to be simply a reservoir that holds in the new life and refreshment of the Holy Spirit, rather more like a river through which God’s Spirit can flow through us to others. For example: The forgiven can extend forgiveness. They are graceful givers.

The church is also the Lord’s instrument for shaping His witnesses. Our purpose is to tell of *“the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us”* Eph. 1:7. Are you able to admit your trespasses to someone and then tell of the immeasurable greatness of His power that saved you from continuing in those trespasses? We need to share our stories with one another. That’s the inheritance we have obtained in Christ. It’s our redemption that has brought us into God’s family.

Last Sunday afternoon I was talking with a man from another church. He told me a story of a deer hunting trip he took to Texas. He was up in a stand looking one way and suddenly from behind him came this big buck, who walked straight toward him then right under his blind. He said that he didn’t shoot it but just watched it walk on by. Then he began to choke up with emotion as he said it reminded him how it was like the grace of God; how God could just as easily strike us down for our sins, and we’d deserve it, but He shows us mercy instead. This man knew he was a forgiven sinner.

If you don’t have assurance of this deep in your soul, if you don’t know that you have received immeasurable forgiveness through Jesus, then I guess you don’t have much to share. Many Christians struggle to tell of the power of Jesus in their lives because they haven’t told themselves or maybe haven’t let His great news sink in to the depths of their souls. Ask the Lord to reveal it to you. Ask the Lord to show it through you. God can use you for His purpose in the world. And for many of us that begins with our children; raising them in such a manner that they also come to know Jesus in all His goodness, power, and glory.

And the church is where they belong so that the Body of Christ might nurture them in faith.

Be not afraid, it's not all up to you. Jesus said, "... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," Acts 1:8. The power of the Holy Spirit makes us ambassadors of Christ. It's like one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread. Jesus is the bread of life. "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.... But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us," 2 Cor. 4:5&7. We are the vessels to share Him. The Holy Spirit is the power to bring them to faith in Christ.

Jesus is also using the church to shape our character through service. The character of Christ grows stronger in us as we seek to be His hands and feet. But always be on guard against self-chosen service for God. When I stop telling God what I want or what I am willing to do in His name, then, and only then can He use me for His purposes and grow His character in me. Church people do many good works for those in need in their church and community... and that alone is helpful. But if God is not in it, even self-sacrifice may miss the mark. If Jesus is no longer in it and believers have taken it over they will begin to believe in themselves more than in Jesus, and that is fatal.

A friend says three groups of people can be found in every congregation. There are the consumers: "Just browsing." If they don't find what they're looking for (and very often they aren't sure what they're looking for) they do not remain. There are customers: "We come to this church because of the music program," or children's programs, or missions, or the teaching, etc). They stay awhile but if the program they want isn't up to snuff, they leave. The third group is the shareholders: they are the ones who show up when you announce a workday, an outreach event, or a prayer meeting. They are the ones who serve when and where needed, always making it about Jesus and not about themselves. They are graceful givers of their time, money, and prayers so that Christ's Body may be built up. They have a passion to see Jesus and to share Jesus and a willingness to commit their resources to that passion. Which one are you: consumer, customer, or shareholder? We could stop here and ask ourselves: "If every other member of First Church was like me, what kind of church would we have?"

Jesus builds His church with the shareholders, not with the other two groups, although many of the shareholders were once customers or consumers. Shareholders are people who are grateful that their lives were straightened out by surrendering its direction to Jesus, and they know that the world needs Him too. So they've invested themselves, their time and their money, in what Jesus is doing through church. Perhaps the defining characteristic of the shareholder

is that he or she realizes that their life is not their own, just as St. Paul said, *“You are not your own; you were bought at a price,”* 1 Cor. 6:20. God is using us from His great personal standpoint, and all He asks is that we trust Him. We are church when we trust Him.

Look at us, FUMC ... we're placed right here, smack dab in the middle of Bakersfield. Have all the people you know, starting with your family, your neighborhood, those living right around here ... have they all come to know the transforming power of Jesus Christ?

How can the church move back to being a place where the glory of God is sought rather than the comforts of men and women? The only answer is to pray! Pray for your pastor and leaders, pray for yourself, pray for the whole congregation. Pray that we keep the church from catering to the world. Pray that we truly become a vessel of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a vessel for the Holy Spirit. In that way we will truly live the glorious truths that the Bible proclaims.

***“We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God”* 2 Corinthians 5:20.**