

LAKESIDE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
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WHY THE CHURCH?
Matthew 16:21-28

Whenever I'm on vacation, inevitably someone, somewhere ends up asking me, "What do you do for a living?" My witty answer over the years has evolved into: "I'm in life insurance ... *Eternal life insurance.*" I always get this very strange look, but then I go on to say, "Just kidding ... *I'm a Presbyterian Minister.*" That explanation, more frequently, elicits *stranger* looks and is often followed-up by some form of the question: "Why would *anybody* want to be a minister?" "That means being part of the Church, doesn't it?" they said. "WHY THE CHURCH?"

That's the question with which I begin this morning. WHY THE CHURCH?



George Arthur Buttrick in his book, *So We Believe, So We Pray*, expresses amazement that the Church found its way into our Apostles Creed. He wrote:

"Why should the Church become an article of belief? Faith in God, in Christ, perhaps in the Holy Spirit, we can understand; but faith in the Church seems like leaning on a rickety fence above a precipice." (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951, p. 72)



As I stated last Sunday, THE CHURCH HAS ALWAYS HAD ITS CRITICS.

Down through the centuries no institution has been so universally *LOVED* on the one hand and universally *HATED* on the other. The Roman emperors of the first Christian centuries *hated* the Church passionately and tried *every means at their disposal* to *stamp it out*. From the *early days* when Christians paid for their faith by dying in the Roman arenas, through the *1960s in our own country* when churches were bombed by those who opposed integration, the Church has moved through *the bitterest opposition* and *persecution* and *emerged stronger than ever!* There even arose a saying: "The seed of the Church is watered by the blood of the martyrs."

When one of the Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century, Theodore Beza, John Calvin's friend and successor in Geneva, was threatened by his king and commanded to disavow Protestantism or face death, he replied, "May it please your majesty to remember that the Church is an anvil which has broken many hammers!"

So it has.

Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (the powers of death) will not prevail against it." His words have proven to be prophetically true. In our lifetimes we have seen tyrants like Hitler and Stalin *unleash their fury against* the Church. But today, the Church still flourishes in those former Iron Curtain countries ... because *no human barrier can shut it out.*

Yes, the Church has weathered countless centuries of opposition and persecution ... and grown stronger. But the *ONE ATTITUDE* which has done *MORE HARM* than any other to the Church in recent years ... that *ONE ATTITUDE* that I often encounter when asked of my profession ... can be summed up in *ONE QUESTION* and interpreted with just *ONE WORD*:

- ➔ **Again the question: “WHY THE CHURCH?”**
- ➔ **The word I used last week ... IRRELEVANCE.**



WHAT IS THE CHURCH, ANYWAY?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “church”? Most people think of a *building* ... the church on the corner, the little brown church in the vale, or that imposing brick fortress down on Main Street. But the Church is *NOT* a building. The building is *WHERE* the Church *MEETS*. If you were to ask any of the first-century Christians, “Are you going to Church this Sunday?” they wouldn’t know *WHAT* you were talking about.

- ➔ In the first place ... the Church was *NOT* a building to which you go. The Church was the *PEOPLE*. You don’t *GO* to the Church, you *ARE* the Church.
- ➔ Secondly ... those first Christians would brave *any obstacle*, undergo *any persecution*, suffer *any ostracism*, for the opportunity of gathering together with their fellow Christians.

For those first Christians, it was a *cold* and *cruel* world out there, and they had to huddle together for warmth. They wouldn’t be able to understand *WHY* any Christian would choose to *STAY AWAY*.



When we speak of the Church we should mean that *Universal Fellowship* of *ALL* those who believe in Jesus Christ ... *living* and *dead*. One of the traditional hymns we sing expresses it well:

*For all the saints, who from their labors rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed,
Thy Name, O Jesus, be forever blessed.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

*O blest communion, fellowship divine!
We feebly struggle, they in glory shine;
Yet all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.
Alleluia, Alleluia!*

That is the Church. The company of *ALL* believers in *ALL* times and *ALL* places who are united *IN* and *AROUND* the one person who best *lived* and *embodied* all that God intends for humanity ... Jesus Christ.

In the Apostles Creed, when we say those words, “I believe in the holy catholic church” this is *EXACTLY* what it means. We’re not talking about the Roman Catholic Church, “Catholic” means *UNIVERSAL*, *WORLD-WIDE*, *ALL-INCLUSIVE*, *WITHOUT BARRIERS*. “Catholic” means just the *opposite* of *narrow* or *sectarian*. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he said, “*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for ALL of you are ONE in Christ Jesus.*” -- Galatians 3:28



Folks, what I’ve laid out for you is the *IDEAL* ... that to which the church should strive to *BE* and *DO*. But unfortunately that is *NOT* what people see from outside these walls.

There is that strange word in the creed which speaks of the church as being “holy.” “*I believe in the holy catholic church,*” we say. Sometimes we feel like the cynic who said, “*I believe in the holy catholic church ... and only wish that it existed!*” The

Church, as we know it, does not seem too holy. And if it doesn't seem so to those who view it from the outside, think of those of us who are on the inside!



I remember the story of the man who woke up with a hangover. "Your eyes look terrible!" a friend said. The suffering fellow said, "*You should be looking out from THIS side!*"

To those who would point out the Church's imperfections, I can only say: "*You should try looking out from THIS side!*"



There is an old saying that neither sausage nor politics ought to be seen while they are being made. That might apply to much of what the Church does, also. *The church ISN'T perfect, but it is still the instrument God has chosen for AFFECTING CHANGE in the world.*



The Biblical meaning for the word "holy" means "set apart for Gods use." Thus the Church is "holy" ... set apart for God's use. And again, when we speak of the "Church," we are *NOT* speaking of a building, *BUT A PEOPLE*. The word Church itself in the Greek (ecclesia) means those called-out. People who live in the world, but who have been "*called out*" by God to *live* and *witness* to God's purposes in the world.

Bishop John Shelby Spong says this of the church in his book, *A New Christianity for a New World*:

I see this new church or ecclesia as the community of those who have been *called out* of limits, *out* of prejudices, *out* of brokenness, *out* of self-centeredness. But one cannot be called *out* of anything without also being called *into* something. So I also see the church as a community of people called *into* life, called *into* love, called *into* being, called *into* wholeness, called *into* God ... so as to be the body of Christ, the incarnation of God's love for the world.

Paul said, "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for ALL of you are ONE in Christ Jesus.*" It has taken the Church nearly two thousand years to catch up to Paul's vision, and in some ways we *still* have some catching up to do. But that is the Church, the universal fellowship of those who believe in and seek to serve Jesus Christ.



St. Paul was the first to call the Church "The Body of Christ." What that does for us is to bring the whole thing down from the "heavens" and rests it solidly upon this earth. You see, there are a lot of people who like to talk about the invisible Church, and claim to be a part of that Church, *but the invisible Church makes few demands upon us.*



A woman once said to her pastor on the way out of worship: My husband couldn't be with you this Sunday, but he asked me to tell you that he is with you in spirit. The pastor replied, "*How much did his spirit put in the offering plate?*"

The reality is we cannot just say we believe in the Church and let it go at that. Whenever and wherever there are Christians, they quickly unite themselves to form a congregation ... a VISIBLE MANIFESTATION of the Universal Church ... living as the Body of Christ here on earth.



Theologian Karl Barth once wrote:

If the Church has not this visibility, then it is not the Church. Take good note, that a pastor who does not believe that in this congregation of his, including those men and women, old wives and children, Christ's body exists, then that pastor does not believe at all in the existence of the Church. (Dogmatics in Outline, London: SCM Press, 1957, pp.142-143)

The Church is the Body of Christ, that is, it has been given the awesome responsibility of carrying on Christ's ministry in the world today ... to be the *VISIBLE EXPRESSION* of God's love.



When Eve asked her husband in the Garden of Eden, "Do you love me?" he replied: "*Who else?*"

I'd like to ask *YOU: WHO ELSE* but the *CHURCH* is trying to get Christ's message of *love* and *acceptance*, of *living life to the fullest* ... *WHO ELSE* but the *CHURCH* is *even trying* to get that message out to the world?



Still, we hear people say: *I BELIEVE IN GOD, AND IN THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. BUT I DONT BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH.*

That statement sounds logical on the surface, but it must be examined carefully. The truth of the matter is that there would be *NO* Christian Faith *without the Church*. *The Church is the REMEMBERER of the past and the BEARER OF GOOD NEWS to the present.*

None of us started from scratch. All that we have of our Christian Faith has been given to us by others. It is from the Church, imperfect as it has been through the years, that we have heard the old, old story that we have loved. The notion of *God as Divine Parent*, which we take for granted, *was given to us by the Church*. *Without the Church's guidance*, it is doubtful that any of us would ever have thought to *pray*.



A man asked Calvin Coolidge one day: "Why can't I worship God out on the lake fishing as well as in Church?" Coolidge's terse reply was this:

You *can*, but you *don't*. I've seen very few people praying with a fishing pole or a putter in their hands. I've heard some theological language on the golf course, mind you, but it was usually uttered *out of context*.

Coolidge's reply was clever, but not quite accurate. We *can* pray alone, but *worship* is a *CORPORATE AFFAIR*. It is something which the people of God *DO TOGETHER*. As John Calvin put it so eloquently: "*The New Testament knows of no solitary Christians.*"



Can't I be just as good a Christian without the Church? My only answer is: *I can't be! I need the Church*. I *need* its *fellowship*, its *prayers*, its *witness*, to nurture me along in my Christian life. *I am simply not strong enough to go it alone*. If it were not for the Church I would never even have *heard* the glad *Good News of the Gospel* which transformed my life or would have never *experienced unconditional love and acceptance, encouragement and support when I was hurting* ... *the Body of Christ living in the world*. *I NEED the Church, and I cannot help but believe that EVERYONE else does, also.*

Maybe there are some exceptional spiritual athletes out there who are strong enough go it alone in their Christian life. Perhaps there are those who can become saints without the Church. *But I haven't met any of them.*



A long time ago, when I was a kid, I can remember a ferry that was used to go across the Ohio River to the Wheeling Island. It was quite an *adventure* as a small child! I can remember often waiting in line for a ferry to get across and thinking it might be possible for a person to swim across, provided that person was a good enough swimmer. But why go to the bother?? There actually was a bridge, why not use it?

Well, the Church is the bridge which Jesus has built to get us across to God. *Why go it alone?*

"I will build my church," Jesus said, *"and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."* **WHY THE CHURCH?**

- ➔ Because it is the only institution on this earth that offers us the opportunity to worship God with other Christians.
- ➔ Because it is the only organization I know of that cares that the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ gets out into the world.
- ➔ Because everything that is *good* and *holy* and *wonderful* and *of ultimate significance in our lives* has been given to us by the Church.

The New Testament says that *Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for it.* (Ephesians 5:25) Jesus believed his radical message of transforming love and acceptance so completely that he was willing to go to a cross. *Is it too much to expect that we should LOVE the Church and GIVE OURSELVES to it?*

Jesus also said, *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*



Harry Emerson Fosdick is the source of many excellent stories and illustrations for sermons. Here's one which I came across recently:

It seems that a major women's college was conducting a financial campaign and a wealthy, prominent Alumna was asked by the committee to send a message to back up their appeal. "Make it happy, something to cheer us up!" the committee instructed.

The Alumna wrote back that she was glad to send a message but she could not make it happy. "Tell them for me," she wrote, "**NEVER** take your college for granted. A lot of people **BROKE THEIR HEARTS** to give it to you."

So with the Church.

NEVER take it for granted.

Do not take lightly that which others have **BROKEN THEIR HEARTS TO GIVE TO YOU.**

Amen and Amen.