

## What is Church?

Acts 2:41-47; I Corinthians 1:1-3; I Peter 2:9-10

In our exploration into our spiritual identity as a community of faith I follow last week's sermon, "What is Baptist?" with today's "What is Church?" The answer may seem obvious, but as Samuel Johnson said long ago: "Humans more frequently require to be reminded than informed."

I'm not talking about the church as an institution or an organization, but as a community called and gathered by God. So here are some marks of what, who, the church is.

### I

One of the earliest names for the church, mentioned a number of times in the book of Acts, was "The Way.

I like the phrase. We are on The Way of Jesus with Jesus. The cover art of our bulletin illustrates this dimension. In this 14<sup>th</sup> century reproduction of a tomb-cover on Iona the church is depicted as a ship. We are on a journey of faith. Together. The masthead is in the shape of the cross, as Christ guides us across the high seas. We do not travel in the shallows. The Psalmist wrote: "Some went

down to the sea in ships, doing business on the mighty waters; they saw the deeds of the Lord in the deep.” (Ps. 107:22).

“Cast your nets into the deep”, Jesus said to his disciples. Not the shallows near shore. As someone quipped “All the noise is in the shallow end of the pool.”

The masthead cross is a flowering, or floriated, cross. It joins the great Hebrew symbol of the Tree of Life with the Christian Cross. The cross is more than an instrument of death; it is a tree of life.

We the church are on a journey. We’ve not yet arrived at our destination. We are on-the-Way.

## II

The main New Testament word for church is *ecclesia*, the “called out ones.” We have been called and gathered by God. So Paul emphasized this as he begins his first letter to the Corinthians. Not only is he called to be an apostle, we are called as a people, called “saints”, which does not mean perfect but those who’ve joined in partnership with God in God’s purposes in the world.

## III

Our passage in I Peter describes the church in some beautiful ways. We are a people chosen. Not in an exclusive sense—“we are chosen, they are not”—but in a particular sense. We bear Jesus’ message, life and way in the world.

We are a “royal priesthood”, all of us priests, all ministers—as we like to say here—all vessels of grace to one another. One of the banners of the Reformation was “the priesthood of all believers”. This does not mean we stand as individual priests before God, but that we are *priests to one another*. Luther spoke about our having a “priest at every elbow.”

Then the striking words, “God’s own people.” Not God’s *only* people, but God’s own. And our calling is to “proclaim the mighty acts of the One who called us out of darkness into God’s marvelous light.” Mighty acts like Creation, Israel, Exodus and Christ. Once we walked in darkness, now we live in the light.

Then these beautiful concluding words:

Once you were no people,  
 now you are God’s people;  
 once you had not received mercy,  
 now you have received mercy.

It’s all mercy. Called, chosen, gathered by the mercy of God. Perhaps the church’s first name should be Mercy.

#### IV

Now let’s talk about the particular nature and identity of the church. In the Old Testament the people of Israel were called God’s “peculiar treasures.” So with

Israel, so with us: peculiar and treasure. Flannery O'Connor paraphrasing Jesus wrote: "You shall know the truth; and the truth will make you odd!"

We are not a Buddhist temple, a Jewish synagogue, a Muslim Mosque, we are a church. The philosopher George Santayana wrote:

...every living thing and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and the bias which that revelation gives to life.

Our idiosyncrasy among the religions is that Jesus of Nazareth is our center, not the circumference—we will talk about that next week—but the center and heart of our life together. We carry on his life in the world.

Dialogue with other faiths requires that we respect other faiths as they are *and* at the same time stay true to our identity. Interfaith friendship does not mean every religion dissolving into each other.

Our power is in our idiosyncrasy, our bias, our special and surprising message.

#### IV

Next question: Who's in the church and who's not? The terms "visible church" and "invisible church" are sometimes used to ponder the question.

The “visible church” is the roster of all those on church rolls. The “invisible church” is comprised of all those who are the hands and feet of Jesus in the world, sometimes without knowing it. As the poet Hopkins wrote: “Christ plays in ten thousand places.” You can be a part of the visible church and not the invisible church and part of the invisible church but not the visible church.

Some think that they know exactly who is in and who is out. A few years back Alabama Baptists published a figure of all the people who were saved in Alabama. How did they get a copy of God’s Roll Book? They probably just tabulated the members of all the Southern Baptist churches in the State. Some of us used to sing, “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder, I’ll Be There.” I think there will be more there than we can ever imagine.

## V

There are many images of the church in the New Testament. New Testament scholar Paul Minear counts over a hundred. Some are:

Salt

light

boat

vine

table

priesthood

letter

aroma

household

flock

The three main images are:

1. The people of God
2. The body of Christ
3. The fellowship, or community (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit. <sup>1</sup>

Being part of number 2, the body of Christ, is how we become part of the 1. larger people of God and 3. the community of the Spirit.

## VI

Our passage from Acts describes the very first Christian community. This is what they were about: “they devoted to the apostles teaching, to each other in the fellowship (*koinonia*) and to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Following this, here are four crucial dimensions of being the church.

1) *Worship*. We are a “house of prayer for all people.” In worship we offer our whole selves to God in prayer and song, we hear scripture read and proclaimed and we share at Christ’s table.

2) *Education*. We are a “school of Christian formation.” Paul called it “the School of Christ.” As we learn of him we are being formed more and more into his likeness, even if we can’t see it in ourselves. We learn the stories and teachings of both Testaments, and they become our story.

3) *Fellowship*. We are a “community of grace and peace.” We have been given to one another. We are more than a collection of members, we are “members of one another.” What does this look like? Here are some descriptions in the New Testament:

Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the love of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, and forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. (Ephesians 4:32)

If anyone is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore them in the spirit of gentleness. (Galatians 6:1)

So then, as we have opportunity let us do good to all people, *especially to those who are in the household of faith*. (Galatians 6:10)

Which leads us to fourth dimension.

4) Missions. We are a “mission outpost of the kingdom of God.” In Christ’s name, or even without, we feed the hungry, free the oppressed, work for justice, wage peace, care for the sick and lift up the fallen. As such we are “the poured out church”, to use the phrase of Barbara Brown Taylor. Awaiting execution by Hitler, in his letters and *Papers from Prison*, Dietrick Bonhoeffer wrote: “The church is only the church when it is there for others.”<sup>2</sup>

In other words, we are not only *called* but *sent*. The word “apostle” means one who is sent, sent into the world with our ministry of love. “As the Father has sent me”, Jesus said to his disciples”, “so I send you!” Us too!

## VII

I have offered a “thumbnail sketch”—I hope not a “hangnail sketch”—of the church. I love the church even with all its obvious failings, one moment a bearer of Christ, the next moment a betrayer. The church is where we have met and continue to meet Christ. I love its idiosyncrasy, its bias, its surprising and special message.

## Conclusion

I’ve told you the story of the young Jewish boy approaching his Bar-Mitzvah. His father asked him what he wanted as a gift for this most important occasion. The son said he wanted a Honda.



Let me stop the story for a moment. Judaism has three main branches: , First, Orthodox Judaism, the strict traditionalists. Then Conservative Judaism, the moderate branch. Then the most liberal branch, Reform Judaism. The church has its similar flavors.

Back to the story. The father didn't know what a Honda was. So he went to his Orthodox rabbi and said, "My son wants a Honda for his Bar-mitzvah. What's a Honda?" The Orthodox said, "I do not know. Go ask the Conservative rabbi. He will know.

The father went to the Conservative rabbi and said, "My son wants a Honda for his Bar-mitzvah. What's a Honda?" the Conservative rabbi said, "I don't know. Go ask the Reform rabbi. He is sure to know."

So the father went to the Reform rabbi and said, "My son wants a Honda for his Bar-Mitzvah. What's a Honda?" The Reform rabbi said, "Oh. That's easy. It's a motor-cycle, but Bar-mitzvah, what this Bar-mitzvah?"

A Reform rabbi told me that joke, poking fun at his own liberal branch of Judaism.

We want our young people to learn about and respect other religions, but we wouldn't want them half through life to say: "Baptism. What is this baptism thing?"

So here are some closing questions:

- 1) What are those experiences you've had when it felt most like church?
- 2) Which of the descriptions, images and dimensions of church that I've talked about appeal to you most?
- 3) What are your favorite memories of growing up in and being a part of church?
- 4) At Grace, where are we strong and where are we weak in our seeking to be the church?

Let the explorations continue!

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1. Paul S. Minear, *Images of Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960).
  2. Dietrick Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Prayers From Prison*, Dietrick Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 561.