

Sermon for August 28, 2016 – “This is the Church...”

22nd Sunday in OT, Year C – Texts: Psalm 127:1-2, 1 Peter: 2:1-10

Remember this? “This is the church, and this is the steeple...Open the door and see all the people...” When most people hear the word church they probably think of a building. Maybe it’s a fancy building or a simple building where believers gather. But biblically speaking, a church is much more than a building and its grounds. In fact, some would say that the church isn’t a building at all, but is all about the people. But what is the church? The word “church” tends to have a very specific image attached to it, a building with a tall steeple usually with a cross perched at the top, sometimes with a sign in front with some sort of cheesy message spelled out in plastic letters.

As a kid, I was raised in the catholic church. I can remember being told what I was and wasn’t allowed to do in “God’s House.” I was told how I was to behave; No running...No laughing...No loud talking...No hats... No eating or drinking. You had to dip your fingers in the holy water as you entered the sanctuary and make the sign of the cross (sometimes I still do!). And, you had to genuflect (that is, kneel) facing the chancel, before you entered the pew or anytime you crossed the middle of the center aisle. The red light of the sanctuary candle was always lit to signify the presence of Christ in the sanctified elements of the Holy Eucharist. There was always a heaviness, almost a dreariness, born of this sense of sacredness. It was not so much holy and hollow, there was little if any, as I recall, joy. As if God would be irritated if anyone were to actually be happy to be there in his house. Lots of people these days seem to have rejected that traditional church image. They opt instead for a gathering at a storefront, local coffee shop or in something resembling a concert hall or sports arena. But, even without the steeple and sign, many of us still think of “church” as a place we go. It’s easy to lose sight of the reality that we’re not just going to church, we **are** the church. Of course, having a fixed location is not a bad thing. Look around...I’d say that having a fixed location, especially one like ours, is a great thing! But it’s important to keep things in perspective. It’s important to remember **who** we are and **why** we are. Because, no matter where we meet, the church building is, first and foremost, a way to reach out to our community. A way to be a presence in, to be part of, the community. But early Christians would be confused by the phrase, “Let’s go to church.”

The Greek word “ecclesia” translated most often in the New Testament as “church” means gathering or assembly and it referred to the people, not a building. So, the folks in Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica, Philippi and so forth would’ve understood themselves to be the Church. It wasn’t a building or tent – it was them! Today, as we sit here on this (or any) Sunday morning, it’s easy to lose sight of the reality that we’re not just **going** to church, we **are** the church. Really, the place we meet shouldn’t matter because as I (and most experts) see it, embracing church as a place causes several problems. The first is that when we see it as a place, “church”, and by extension, our faith, can become compartmentalized. We’re human, it’s natural. We’ve a lot going on, so much on our plates, and so we tend to compartmentalize our lives. Much of this has a lot to do with location, where we are. We’re inclined to act certain ways in certain places... We act a certain way when we’re at work, we act a certain way when we’re out with friends. We want people to see how together we are even if it’s just a façade. We want people to see how well things are going even if they aren’t. We go home, where we can relax and be ourselves – whatever that means. This mindset often transfers over to our lives as Christians, as well...

And this takes us to the second problem. Far too many see Sunday – and Sunday only – as the sum total of the Church experience. You know what I mean, we see “churchy stuff” (prayer, reading the bible, etc.) as something that only happens in the church building only on Sunday morning and only for about an hour. So where’s the problem? The problem is, when we see Church as a building or place we tend to think that that’s the only place where God actually **is** and we tend to think that our relationship with God tends to be something that only really takes place in that particular location. It’s easy to follow Christ in a place where everyone around you thinks you should follow Christ. But, obviously, being the Church should transcend time and place. We have what so many in this world lack and desperately need. So, if our faith exists exclusively in a particular building or, for that matter, around a particular group of people, only those we know and like, then we’ve missed the entire point. Church, and therefore our faith, become limited. If we simply **go** to church, if we make little or no attempt to **be** the Church, then we’re depriving ourselves. Depriving ourselves of the opportunity to become what we were created and called to be. And, perhaps more importantly, we’re preventing that Church itself from being what it was created and called to be. If not us, who? If not now, when? I often wonder if what’s missing in churches these days is rooted in the idea that we view Church and Christianity as consumer events and things we do, not as identities. So many asking, “what can church do for me?”

Finally, Church, and therefore, Christianity, is isolated when we see it as a place. I recently read an article about the “on-line church.” The general consensus was that millennials (a person reaching young adulthood around the year 2000) sees the on-line world as a community. They and others feel they can skip “going to church,” because the message is on-line. They don’t have to go, because they get plenty of stimulating discussions on Facebook (Good luck with that!). Fitting inspirational quotes in 140 characters has become an art form. Let’s not limit this to the online community and the Millennial generation. There are plenty of folks who skip church because of some more pressing matter. And, I’ve met way too many people who think they can get church at home listening to whoever’s preaching on TV on Sunday morning like Joel Osteen, or other peddlers of the “Prosperity Gospel.” In a way, I get that, because Joel and his buddies preach a gospel message that everyone wants to hear. I mean, none of that sin stuff. We want to hear that “God wants us to prosper financially, to have plenty of money, to fulfill the destiny He has laid out for us.” What do you think about that? That’s actually a direct quote from a letter Joel Osteen sent to his flock back in 2005. All this begins when we see Church as a place, not people.

But we have been created to be in community with one another, because it is in the context of that community as an active, serving, integral part of it that we realize our full potential as disciples of Christ. Learning together, engaging with one another, praying together, working together, sharing our joys and our grief, helping bear one another’s burdens, this (this!) is how we grow spiritually! And I believe that this is what people really need and often without realizing it, what they’re really looking for and that is a church that is the walking, talking embodiment of Christ to a world where so many find themselves empty and unfulfilled because they do not know Christ. Think of all the Church could do if we didn’t compartmentalize, limit and isolate ourselves by thinking of ourselves as a place. But, all of this isn’t to say that the building and grounds don’t matter, they most certainly do...

I was reading about a historic Presbyterian church in midtown Kansas City, Missouri. It'd burned to the ground, just a few days after Christmas in 2011. Westport Presbyterian Church had only a few dozen members but the pastor, and some of the members of this aging congregation had figured out how to continue serving the neighborhood that'd been the church's home for 176 years. Besides being a community of faith it became a community center. A day care center, arts groups, nonprofit organizations and others found a home at Westport Presbyterian and the church on several levels had been renewed. That's not to say that folks were flocking to the church and joining in droves, no. And, if you're asking yourselves right now well, if they aren't gaining new members, then what's the point, then you're missing my point. Westport's fire was a reminder to the congregation, and indeed to congregations everywhere, that what makes a church isn't its building. Rather, the church is the people – it's us! And though we often become emotionally attached to the physical space in which we worship, which in and of itself isn't a bad thing, there's a risk of losing sight of the true meaning of church.

I'm not proposing abandoning church buildings and meeting, say, in homes or a local park (though there are worse things we could do...), indeed, some of the most magnificent holy spaces are churches. Our sanctuary is certainly one of them. And, I'll tell you, I'm always awe-struck when I enter the Basilica of the Assumption in Covington, Kentucky. You know, where they hold the May Festival concerts, very few churches whisper to me of the astonishing grace and beauty of God like this one. But, each church speaks to its members in its own particular way. I occasionally drive past the old abandoned Presbyterian church in Saylor Park and I feel sad but it's not because the building is vacant and in disrepair. No, I feel sad because one day the congregation simply was unable to maintain the church and its programs and just decided to pack it in. The belief is that many simply stopped going to church altogether once that building was closed.

I've always wondered: Why this fixation which often borders on idolatry with our buildings? I think that part of this, for me, is because what happens to us within those sacred spaces and what happens is holy and memorable. Our buildings become treasure chests – storehouses – of memory. And we want to imagine that the space will be preserved in some way eternally so as not to diminish what's been experienced there. That's why I find it sad when I think about the Presbyterian "church" in which my grandmother grew up. I call it a Presbyterian church, but use the term loosely because it was actually an African Methodist Church. Shunned by the local Irish-run Catholic church, my grandmother, her family and other Italian immigrants in my hometown would meet in the basement of the AME Church. There, under the guidance and care of an Italian Presbyterian minister by the name of Antonio Pastore, they formed their own congregation. Over the years they would merge with two other Presbyterian congregations into increasingly larger buildings – three to be exact. But as has been the case with many of the mainline denominations, the congregation peaked, I think, somewhere in the mid-to-late 1970's. It then slowly began to decline to where the building is now far bigger than they need.

Brothers and sisters here's the thing, I understand our attachment to buildings – so does God, but I also know that as people of faith we must drive the stakes of our tents into the ground loosely. We must be ready to move wherever God would have us go. We must somehow live in the tension between the holy space we've marked off.

And places to which God would have us go next.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.