

**October 4, 2015**

**TEXT: Acts 17:1–9**

**TITLE: Re-Confirmation Class – Lesson #4: Church**

In our Re-Confirmation Classes, we've explored the three persons of the Trinity—God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. Now our attention shifts to something close at hand: Church. We are currently in a church. We are all part of the larger church. And most importantly, we are the church. The physical structure, the denominational institution, and the ongoing community of faith: all three of them fit within the definition of church. So all three must be considered.

If you ask most people “What is a church?” they'll say “it's a building with pews, pulpit and a preacher. It's a place where they talk about Jesus, baptize babies, share communion, and take up offerings.” At some point, a church joke is told, since everyone knows a church joke. Someone pipes up and says, “Have you heard this one: What three sentences will you never hear in church?” 1) “Since we're all here, let's start the service early! 2) I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before! 3) Hey, it's my turn to sit in the front pew!”

What is the church? Well, it is something ancient. Go back 2000 years and then go back 2000 more. Stand at the base of Mt. Sinai and hear God say to the Hebrews, “I will be your God and you will be my people.” Their ancient gatherings were called “qahal,” which means “assembly” and was their version of church. It involved prayer, sacrifices, offering up some of what the Lord had blessed them with, and remembering, telling stories, about what it means to be God's people.

Here's the first truth you need to remember: Church communities are always necessary, because no religion can be practiced alone. No religion can be learned, understood and lived well in isolation from others. Faith is not an independent study project. This truth runs counter to much of what we're taught about modern American life. The old Burger King campaign about special orders don't upset us and “have it your way” have long been part of the cultural definition of religion. Churches are too often seen as optional institutions for folks who “like that sort of thing”, since personalized piety and do-it-yourself spirituality make less demands on us and fit better in our individualistic culture.

Yet at its heart, church is that ancient need to be together as we seek to be faithful. Whether in the Old Testament Hebrew “qahal” or the New Testament Greek “ekklesia,” church involves coming together before God and for God. Faith is communal because God is communal. The Triune Lord exists in community, Creator, Christ, Spirit, and calls us to live in the same interrelated way with one another. Do church gatherings require a building? No—they can happen in a tent, under a tree, by a riverside, in a living room. That is often where the church met long ago. Commonly Christians meet in churches now, but the building exists only to serve the ministry of the church community.

Someone counted up all the ways the New Testament talks about the church and listed off 97 metaphors. The church is like salt, light, a field where seeds are planted, a body, a bride, or branches growing off a central vine and bearing fruit. The most common description of the church is that it's a community led by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus Christ. This community has ways to enter it (namely prayer and baptism), ways to sustain it (namely worship and communion meals), and ways to improve it (namely scripture, confession, teaching, and service).

Which leads to a second important truth: The church is a living community that has developed institutional structures to fulfill its ministry. These structures are not the same as the ministry, but sometimes they are treated that way. The building, the pews, the preacher, the choir, the bookkeeper and staff are only tools assisting us to be a church community. When we forget that, we worship God-structures, not a God-Savior. When we forget that, we neglect the Godly power that saves for an ungodly church power that can abuse—sometimes with physical abuse, often with mental abuse. You can't practice religion alone and you need some structures to live out this faith. But as the first commandment says, You shall have no other God beside me, whom alone you shall worship and serve. We worship God through the church; we don't worship the godly-idol some are tempted to make of the church.

I love the way the gospels talk about the church as a living organism. In Matthew, Mark, Luke and John it is called a flock following a shepherd, a mustard seed growing up big and strong, a city active in caring for others that is set on a hill for all to see. When I turned from the gospels to the stories in Acts and the letters of Paul, I was looking for an upbeat description of the early church as a positive, living body of Christ. But I kept running into stories like what we heard in Acts 17. Paul goes to a city, where he preaches among his own people in the synagogues. Then he goes out and preaches to others in public places like the markets or by the rivers. Some listen and accept the good news he shares. Other don't – and in fact some get so angry that they literally round up a mob either to arrest Paul or chase him out of town. Why such a strong reaction to a message about God's power breaking into this world as revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Because if Christ is alive and God's power is truly active in our world, then we are no longer the most powerful thing here on earth and death no longer has the final word.

When people got angry at Paul's preaching, they shouted "These people are turning the world upside down!" That statement was truer than the crowds realized. Honestly, instead of a handshake and a "Nice sermon" comment after the service, I'd prefer that half of you stood up and walked out saying "he's turning the world upside down." At least then I'd know that the gospel being preached was heard as life-changing, if not life-unsettling. Paul told his audience that in place of the Emperor Caesar, there was a Messiah King who held higher office. And instead of a religion whose doors were barred to outsiders, this gospel was for Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, whole and

crippled alike. Their old world was upside-down; Paul's message insisted that it could finally be turned right-side up by God's grace and Christ's healing love.

We do a lot here as a church. We do baptisms, communion, Sunday School and worship. We pray together, study together, work together—mission projects here, across the country, around the world. But truthfully, in the end there is no substitute for doing what Paul did and tell the world about Jesus Christ. Tell the world that we follow and believe in One who was dead and now is alive and calling us all to serve the Kingdom of God which is in our midst.

When we do this, we discover a third basic truth about what it means to be the church: Christian faith is always an “and” statement. I believe in Christ and... I believe in Christ and I turn away from things that sinfully harm others and myself. I believe in Christ and I actively seek peace on earth and a sustainable use of our earth's resources. I believe in Christ and I will speak out against torture, capital punishment, solitary confinement, and punitive practices that have nothing to do with criminal justice, but reflect state-sponsored unjust forms of incarceration. I believe in Christ and I will use my voice and my vote to enact real change regarding gun possession in America, so that the people shot in Oregon precisely because they professed they were Christians will not have died in vain.

As a church, we constantly say, “I believe in Christ and...” We believe in Christ and will humbly seek to live together and love and serve one another as Christ did. We will serve communion to whomever is next to us for our only hope and salvation is in Christ present in the space between us this day. We believe and we will share that belief by word and deed, in this house and outside these walls, this Sunday and Monday through Saturday as well—until the accusations launched at Paul actually come true, and this world, this hurting, distracted, violent and self-destructive world is finally turned upside-down and made right-side up by God's grace at last.

O Church, we don't practice our religion alone.

O Church, let us use our institutional structures for ministry, instead of believing they alone are the ministry.

O Church, let us from this day forth tell the world, “I believe in Christ and...” trusting in the one who is at work in you to finish that sentence for the healing of the world and the glory of God.