

“The Church Is...”
May 31, 2020

Acts 2:1-21

I didn't read the entire second chapter of Acts this morning. It concludes by telling us that those first followers of Jesus “broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.”

After the dramatic story of Pentecost—the rushing wind, the tongues as of fire, the different languages, Peter's sermon, the welcoming of thousands who were baptized—this seems rather quotidian. But it is, perhaps the most important part of the story for us this year.

The early chapters of Acts tell of the followers of Jesus *in their homes*. Yes, they are Jewish people living in Jerusalem, so they go to the Temple on a regular basis. But their common life finds its base in houses.

As the church spread, it continued to meet in houses. So we heard Paul telling of Aquila and Prisca—and the church in their house—sending greetings to the church in Corinth.

As these followers of the risen Christ in uncertain and precarious times are in their *homes*—as you are today—they begin to grasp what it means to be the church—as we do today.

As much as we love and care for this building, as much as we thrill to see its steeple as we come up the Jefferson St. hill or drive down Clinton St., as much as this place is important to our lives and our community, we acknowledge the truth that we sang: “The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple.”

But, if not, then what is the church?

Well, the song says “the church is people.”

So I invited all of you *people* in your homes to send me a video or an email with your response to the simple phrase: “The church is...”

We had one video. Here's what Sue and Chuck said.

Maybe we're all still getting up to speed with our technology, so many simply wrote.

Shelagh was the first to send something, so I'll read what she said first. Expanding on the idea that the church is people, she said: “Church is a group of people who gain strength from each other in their quest to follow Jesus in the world.”

Ethel elaborated on that sense of gaining strength and going into the world, saying:

The church is a community of believers in Christ who are called to witness to God's love and to minister to the needs of the world. As members of the church and in the spirit of Christ we welcome all people into this community of faith as we seek to respond to the good news of the Gospel.

Our public worship joins us together into this community of faith. Through the reading and proclaiming of Scripture we learn the story of God's love and faithfulness. We encounter what it means to be present in God now, and we respond to God's initiative

with our prayers of thanksgiving, confession, and intercession. As members of one body we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion and are empowered to go forth reflecting God's image into the world.

As members of the church we are called to follow in the way of Christ in our daily lives, committing ourselves to the work of reconciliation and liberation, whether in individual acts of service to those in need, or by advocating for justice for all the marginalized and the powerless around the world. As we minister to the least of these, we are doing so in Christ's name.

One person simply sent a few words: "caring, present, separate yet together." That is especially the case in these days when we gather together while being in our separate homes. But we experience the caring, we are present for each other and for the world at all times.

If, as the song says, the church *is* people, what kind of people are we?
This is what Tom tried to get at when he added what he called his two cents:

The first New Testament reference to church I know of was attributed to Jesus speaking to Peter with the famous word play on Peter meaning rock (petro) and building upon a rock (petra). I think it is telling that Peter, like all who preceded and followed him, was a flawed human who would famously deny his connection to Jesus at the time of Jesus' crucifixion. To me this is appropriate. In particular, our church is a congregation trying to make sense and a difference in the world following the words and teachings of Jesus which are often as complicated as the world in which we seek to apply them. The church is us being reminded that we are not alone. We have each other, our leadership and our relationship with God to try and make our lives and our world a better place.

Flawed human beings trying to make sense of all of this, we hear the good news that we're not alone.

That might be why Donna could say: The church is a collection of the faithful who gather to worship, it's community, and a foundation from which to support social justice. The church is my anchor in times of personal and societal crisis.

Sharyn uses the same image, writing: "The church is an anchor in my life. Our worship every Sunday (in person or virtual) keeps me thinking about what is important to me, our community, and our world. The sermon and prayers reflect the meanings of scripture, and the music inspires me. It all fits together into a weekly message that is always important. I see our congregation every Sunday from the choir loft and appreciate their presence. I learn about Jesus and the early church, I try to understand God. The social concerns provide a focus for me amidst the many problems of our time. The anchor in the stained-glass window is a symbol of the ever-present nature of our church. The church is here and the church will remain."

Andy also sees the church as a gathering of flawed human beings: "The church is an assembly of sinners. My favorite assembly of sinners. Repentant sinners.

Matthew 9:10-13 (NRSV) - When the Pharisees saw this, they said to the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he (Jesus) heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."

Even when there's no pandemic, we are all in need of the healing that Jesus can bring."

While we are flawed, we are also capable of much. Sonia puts her experience in this way: “For me, Church is family. Family doesn’t judge you or impose conditions on love. As someone with autism, I feel like I can be myself, surrounded by love.”

No wonder, then, that Vicki says: “Church is a cherished gift from God.”

Ann Mary finds some clues as to what the church is in the very word. Let me show you this:

C...ommunion with each other

H...ealing for the mind and soul

U...nity even when apart

R...enewal when stale

C...onsolation in these dark times

H...eavenly manna for the hungry heart

Bill and Janet said, “Our response is: The church is... a fellowship of believers.”

And in that fellowship, Steve and Sue say, mission and worship are central: “The church is a congregation with a mission of helping others, and a special place where we can worship and appreciate the gift of His Son together.”

Jane understands the church as a covenant with fellow questioners seeking the Other.

And Margaret tells us “Church is communion—in every sense.”

There is more—there is always more. Megan expressed this in saying: Here's my sentence: Church is where you learn what to do with the fact that somehow, the god of the universe has addressed you.

“It's not that I lack anything more to say,” she added. “It's just that there's so much to say. So maybe one line will be enough for now.”

There is so much to say. So we keep trying to express to ourselves and to others just what the church is. Sometimes we use words. Sometimes we use actions. Always we seek to make clear that we are people of hope.

That’s especially important right now:

The needless violence and death across our nation;

The racism that no one wants to see, the racism that strips us of courage and leaves us appalled and astounded;

The voices of white supremacy more and more entering the mainstream of political conversation;

The turmoil of recent days and the ongoing uncertainty that we face in the months ahead can cause us to lose hope, to give up hope, to watch in sorrow as hope dies.

So this morning I want to hold up for you the church not as a building, but as a people—you and me and all of us together—who take on the difficult challenges we are presented with. A people who move forward to bring the love of God made known in Christ to those challenges.

We can acknowledge that we are traveling together through difficult times. In the coming months we will be involved in the process of discovering how we will be the church in these days when we will remain separated yet connected in new and vibrant ways. Let us stay together, keep in contact with each other so that we come through these days stronger, with greater meaning and purpose, with hope, and with a renewed commitment to being the church.

It is vitally important in these days for all of us to be the church. Our community, state, nation, and world desperately need our faith, our hope, and our love. So we must, with the power of the Spirit, do all that we can to increase these gifts within us and among us. We need to worship and pray and study and talk and support and act and give. We need to be present for one another and for the wider world. Consider all the ways that our various members understand the church; consider all of them all of the ways that *you* understand it to be.

Let us be the church in our homes.

Let us be the church in the world.

Let us be the church together.