

“We, The Church”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 2:1-5 (The Message)

¹⁻⁵The Message Isaiah got regarding Judah and Jerusalem:

There’s a day coming when the mountain of God’s House will be The Mountain—solid, towering over all mountains. All nations will river toward it, people from all over set out for it. They’ll say, “Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain, go to the House of the God of Jacob. He’ll show us the way He works so we can live the way we’re made.” Zion’s the source of the revelation. God’s Message comes from Jerusalem. He’ll settle things fairly between nations. He’ll make things right between many peoples. They’ll turn their swords into shovels, their spears into hoes. No more will nation fight nation; they won’t play war anymore. Come, family of Jacob, let’s live in the light of God.

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 2:20-22 (The Message)

²⁰⁻²² God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what He is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now He’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.



Sermon: “We, The Church”

Why be the church? If someone asked you that question, what would you say? Traditionally the church has offered salvation and eternal life as the answers to that question. Why should you be Christ’s disciple? Why should you be a part of the church? Because heaven and not hell, that’s why. But one of my seminary professors said the church has long enticed people with heaven and threatened them with hell to get them to be a part of the church. But that meant people were joining not in faith or a desire to follow Christ, but just as a way to secure a favorable position after death. “That’s not discipleship,” he said, “that’s fire insurance.”

Ed Cotter always used to tell me that when you’re a disciple, “the pay isn’t very good but the retirement benefits are outta’ this world.” I’ve always thought that was a good way to see it. But if you are a part of the church only because of how it can benefit you, if you are trying to be a disciple in this life to ensure your place in the next life, then you’re missing the point.

You see, the church is the worldly embodiment of God’s will. Ephesians tells us:

God is building a home. He’s using us all... fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together.

The church is the physical manifestation of a spiritual reality. Romans¹ and First Corinthians² describe the church as Christ's body and Christians as parts of it. After Jesus' resurrection, He ascends to heaven and in the Book of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus' followers and that is where we say the church was born.³ By the power and presence of God's Holy Spirit, the church is established to carry on what Jesus started; to be His hands and feet in the world; to enact God's will; to share the good news of God's grace and mercy and steadfast love – that's the church; that's what you're being called to be a part of.

How about *that*? You're not just people in pews, singing the songs (or in some cases, not singing them) saying your prayers, and bringing food to the occasional potluck. You are agents of God's will. Now, you might be thinking "Who am *I* to be an agent of God's will?" Well, who are you *not* to be?

God has invited us all to follow Jesus Christ; to live and love as He did, to dedicate our lives to learning about God's will and working to do it. The author of Ephesians uses the metaphor of construction. God is building a temple and we disciples are all integral parts of it. "Church" is the word we use to describe that community of believers and servants who have accepted God's invitation to be a part of what God is building.

The word "Church" can be confusing. It is a word that is often misused to refer to denominations and buildings and organizations. And when I say, "The church is the physical embodiment of God's spiritual presence on earth," there are probably a few of you who think that sounds pretty arrogant. But I don't mean *just this* congregation or *just this* denomination or really *any* specific entity we would call "*a church*." The church is the entire community of those called by God, past, present, and future.

The church is not an organization. What we call the PCUSA or the Southern Baptist Convention is not the church. The church is not presbyteries or bishops or diocese. Those are *structures* human beings have created to order the church. But they are not the church.

And the Church is not a building. For a long time, people have wanted to construct large, beautiful buildings to reflect their sense of that place being God's house. From Solomon's Temple, right down to the modern churches all around us, faithful followers of God have, for millennia, tried to construct not just houses of worship, but monuments to God, filled with the best, most beautiful things they could afford.

You're sitting in one right now. The stained-glass windows tell the Biblical story. The ceiling resembles the inverted hull of a ship, reminiscent of the Ark by which God saved God's people. The high granite pillars and arches remind us of the strength of the God we worship. The red carpet and pew cushions remind us of the blood Christ shed on the cross. The sanctuary faces

¹ Romans 12:4-5, NRSV

² 1 Corinthians 12:27, NRSV

³ Acts 2:1-47, NRSV

east so that the morning sun lights up the large stained-glass window behind me. This is a beautiful sacred space intended to glorify a beautiful sacred God. But it's not the church.

I've seen congregations meet in store fronts, and private homes and little one-room cinder-block buildings way out in the country. I've seen rodeo churches, truck stop churches, and a church that meets in a tattoo parlor. The church is not the place. That's just geography. The church is the people meeting in that place.

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus says "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The Church is people.

In the New Testament, the Greek word that means "Church" is "ecclesia." Its literal meaning is "the ones who are called out." The church is the community of people who are called by God out into the world. And this community is characterized mainly by two things:

1. The presence of God's Holy Spirit and
2. Life lived as a response to God's grace, mercy, and steadfast love.

When we say the Apostle's Creed, there are people who will skip over the line "I believe in the holy catholic church" because they aren't catholic. But the word catholic is not capitalized in the Apostle's Creed. The word "catholic" in that context is not referring to a denomination (which would be capitalized), it is referring to the universal church; the community of all believers, everywhere. To say we believe in the holy catholic church is to affirm that all Christians everywhere are connected to God and one another through Christ.

And it can be hard to see ourselves as an important part of this broader Christian community. So often I hear people talk about the church as if it were something "out there." As if it were some large, entity with which they have a consumer relationship... like, for instance, "Hollywood!"

We don't see ourselves as a part of the business of Hollywood. A bunch of people we don't know make decisions with which we may agree or disagree. They hire people to fill roles, some of whom we like, others not so much. They put out a product and we go, pay some money, sit in a theater, consume the product, probably pass judgement on whether we thought this one was as good as the last one, and then we go home. Sound familiar?

That is our relationship with Hollywood. But too often and for far too many people, that is also our relationship with the church. Except the church is not something *out there*. It's not a source of content that we consume for our own edification. The church is you. The church is all of us. We are the church.

You see, you may think you are here because your family always comes to church or because you have friends here or because you enjoy the preaching or the music or the free coffee; you may think you are here because you had no place else to be. But I am telling you today that you are here because you have been called to be here. You have answered God's invitation to come and be a part of this community which is a part of the larger global body of Christ.

You are an integral, vital, important piece of the Kingdom God is building.

I've had people tell me that it's not so important to be a part of a congregation. That they can worship God on their own, or experience God in nature. But I think that's a load of hooey. I love being out in nature as much as the next guy. I love to see and experience God's handiwork. But what this Ephesians passage tells us is that we are being called into community with others of God's people. And when we come together as the people of God, when we worship, serve, and love, we embody who God is and what God is doing in the world. That's not something we can do alone.

The church is not a manmade creation that stands in the way of God, it is God's creation that facilitates our connecting to God. And if our little part of the church doesn't do that, then we need to get better.

Because it is in the church, it is in this community of faith, that we learn the story of God's long history with God's people and how our story is a part of it. It is in this community that we learn who God is and why the life, death and resurrection of a man named Jesus matters. It is in this community that we feel the Holy Spirit empowering us, hear God's word enlightening us, receive God's call challenging us, and experience God's love surrounding us.

The church is the community of faith that supports and equips us for the life of discipleship to which we have been called. But it also is within this community of God's children, that we encounter God.

Most of y'all know my boys Will Grey and Harry. You probably don't see Harry as much but that's more because he has trouble with big crowds and loud noises. But he's here, every Sunday, with one of his teachers down in the preschool wing, learning and playing, and he loves being here. I love my children and I thank God for them every day. I thank God that they are happy and healthy. I thank God for their gifts of energy and joy. I thank God that when we are older, and can no longer take care of ourselves, Mary & I will have them to clean up after us, and feed us, and do our laundry, and turn the lights off when we leave them on and close the refrigerator when we leave it standing wide open.

But one of my favorite things about Will Grey and Harry is that when I look at them, I see Mary. I see her in their eyes and in the ways they smile. They carry a part of her, and when I look at them I see little, loud, rambunctious reminders of how much I love her and she, me. And when she is away, and they are being loud and rambunctious, I look at them and remember how much I need her to come back... soon. Because I can't do this without her.

The church is sort of like that. The people sitting around you are not God. But they bear a part of God's image and carry a part of God's love and mercy. You are surrounded on all sides by living, breathing reminders of God's care *for* you and of God's challenges *to* you. And they are a reminder that all that God has for us to do, we are not expected to do alone.

And that's what you should say when someone asks why being the church matters.

Life is hard. But God is always with us. Thank God we have the church so that we never forget that truth.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.