

**“Why the Church Matters”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**October 11, 2020**

**Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2: 1-10, 19-22**

You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. <sup>4</sup>But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life...

<sup>19</sup>So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup>built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. <sup>21</sup>In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; <sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.



**Sermon: “Why the Church Matters”**

In an episode of the television show Parks and Recreation,<sup>1</sup> a school group is taking a tour of city hall when one of the children stops in at the office of Ron Swanson and asks to interview him for her school project titled “Why Government Matters.” Now, if you’re unfamiliar with the show, Ron Swanson is noteworthy for his strong dislike of government. I don’t mean just “big government” or “government overreach,” *government*. Which is especially ironic considering he is the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation. That’s right, he’s a government employee who hates the government.

So, when 9-year-old Lauren Burkiss walks into his office and asks him to help her understand “Why government matters,” he happily schools her on what he calls “the miserable screwed up world of local government.” I won’t go into all the details, but basically, he teaches her about what he sees as the evil of taxes, by eating most of her lunch. When he’s done, Lauren turns in her paper which expresses what she has learned about why government matters in precisely two words: “It doesn’t.” It’s meant to be funny, but I still disagree. Government does matter. A lot.

I saw that episode recently and it got me to thinking “What would I say if Lauren Burkiss walked into my office and asked me to help her write an essay titled “Why Does the Church Matter?” It definitely does matter. Especially in this precarious time when we can’t come together in our building. Because we remember that the church isn’t a building or even a specific place. The church is people living and working in fellowship with God and one another. In this challenging time, when we can’t come to this place, we are having to discover new ways to be the church. But why does it matter? What would I say? So, like any good Presbyterian, I turned to the Bible. And found several places where Jesus said something that helps us understand why the church matters. Today I’ll share four of them.

**#1. In Matthew 18:20, Jesus says “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”**

One of the arguments I often hear from people attempting to explain why they don’t participate in church is that they don’t think they need to be in a congregation in order to connect with God. There is a grain of truth to that. God *is* everywhere. Psalm 139 tells us there is no place we can go that God is not right there with us. So yes, you can commune with God while you hike in the woods. You can worship God while viewing the sunrise from the top of your favorite mountain.

But being a Christian is less like Solitaire and more like Football. It’s a group activity. Jesus says clearly, that when we come together in his name, he is among us. God does not call us to an individualistic faith.

The word “Church” is translated from a Greek word that literally means “those who are called forth.”<sup>2</sup> God made us, loves us, and redeems us and God has called us into fellowship with God and one another. We respond to God’s gracious invitation by living and serving in fellowship with God and God’s people. As Shirley Guthrie wrote “To be saved is not just to be assured that I will go to heaven when I die; it is to enter into a new relationship with God and fellow human beings in the community of God’s people here and now.”<sup>3</sup>

We experience the power of God's presence, the nurture of God's Holy Spirit, and the love of God's son, Jesus Christ in the presence, nurture, and love of the gathered community of God's people.

We experience it in the voices of the faithful lifted in proclamation and song; in the warm embrace of fellow travelers in times of grief and times of joy; in broken bread shared around a table, and in homemade casseroles at a time of need.

We experience the presence, nurture, and love of God in words of encouragement and advice; in prayers lifted up on our behalf, and in the powerful witness of, and shared discipleship with, the people of God.

And that can't happen alone on a mountaintop. But it does happen when the community of faith is drawn together by God's Holy Spirit whether in a shared physical space like our building, or connected by internet, phone lines, and cell towers.

**#2. In Mark 10:14 Jesus says "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."**

We want our children to learn about the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God because we have found this experience to be transformative, purpose-giving, and life-changing.

We live in a society that often places a premium on things that are shallow and ultimately unsatisfying like money and power and prestige and stuff. So much in our society emphasizes the self and seeking our own good even when it hurts others. But as the Apostle Paul writes, we are not to be conformed to this world. We are to be transformed.

Jesus invited the little children to come to him. It is our job as parents, and as the great cloud of witnesses to encourage and teach and help our children to know Jesus; to follow him and to be his disciples; to be not conformed to this world, but to be transformed by our experience of the risen Christ. That happens in the church.

And not just for our children, but for all of us. We all learn from scripture, and from the experiences and examples of other Christians. All of us are challenged by what we see in the world around us and all of us are growing in our faith, day by day. In the church, we hear the comfort and the challenge of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the church we learn that loving and serving God means loving and serving others. In the church we experience God's unconditional love and amazing grace.

**#3. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus says "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."**

Go and make disciples of *all* nations. Not "some." Not "many." Not even "most." All. Now that's an enormous task. Some might say an impossible one. Various estimates put the population of the planet at about 7.7 Billion people.<sup>4</sup> The Earth features about 57.5 million square miles of what we could call habitable land, which is to say, land that's not under water.<sup>5</sup> That's a lot of people and a lot of ground to cover. So, let's focus on just the Columbus metro area. That narrows things down a bit but we're still talking about over 2 Million people<sup>6</sup> living within an area of over 3,000 square miles.

If we are to take seriously our call to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with the whole world, or even just with the city of Columbus, we're not going to be able to do that alone. We need each other. We need the church. Christ calls every one of us to the work of evangelism; to share the good news of Jesus Christ around the world. Alone, that is a hopeless task. But in the church, with God's help, all things are possible. It's not just evangelism, though...

**#4. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus says: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' ... when? ... 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'"**

In a world that values power and privilege, Jesus reminds us that those we might consider "the least of these" are in fact Jesus' family. When we turn away the poor, the immigrant, the suffering, we are turning away Jesus' own brothers and sisters. We simply can't ignore the people who are marginalized in our world. Everyone is valued by God. Everyone deserves a chance to enjoy the fullness of life that God wills for all of us. That's not a liberal or conservative thing; it's not a Republican or Democratic thing. It's a God thing.

Jesus of Nazareth, the one we call Christ, is the embodiment of God's love, peace, mercy, and justice. As his disciples, we are called to live lives of love, peace, mercy, and justice, and as the church we are called to be advocates in the world for God's love, peace, mercy, and justice.

You see, this world needs so desperately to see, and hear, and experience daily the truth of God's power and God's presence; of the life giving, transformative power of God's grace, and God's steadfast love. And where will the world see and hear and experience that truth if not in the church?

There are so many wonderful and amazing things in this world, and you should definitely go experience as many of them as are practical. But in this time of political turmoil and social upheaval; of COVID pandemic and the fear and suffering and disruption that comes with it, when it seems like every bad thing is happening all at once, in this time especially, the world needs the church. The world needs desperately, for you and me to be the church. Because in the church, we can see and hear and experience God's will and God's love for the whole world. And that's why the church matters.

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

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Wittels, Harris. "Road Trip." *Parks and Recreation*, performance by Amy Poehler, et al., season 3, episode 14, NBC, 12 May 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, K. L. "Ekklesia." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Edited by Gerhard Kittel, Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromley, Vol. III, Eerdmans, 2006, p. 530.

<sup>3</sup> Guthrie, Shirley C. *Christian Doctrine*. Louisville, Ken.: Westminster/J. Knox, 1994. p.355. Print.

<sup>4</sup> Bureau, U. S. Census. "World Population Day: July 11, 2020." United States Census Bureau, 14 Aug. 2020, [www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/world-population-day.html](http://www.census.gov/newsroom/stories/world-population-day.html).

<sup>5</sup> Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Earth - Wikipedia." 5 Oct. 2020, [en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Earth&oldid=982049805](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Earth&oldid=982049805).

<sup>6</sup> "Columbus Metro Population Growth Continues - ColumbusUnderground.com." ColumbusUnderground, 27 Mar. 2020, [www.columbusunderground.com/columbus-metro-population-growth-continues-bw1](http://www.columbusunderground.com/columbus-metro-population-growth-continues-bw1).