

“The Church”
 John 17:20-23
 August 3, 2008
 Rev. Jeff Allen

We’re in our last month of our summer sermon series on some of the basic doctrines of the church and a United Methodist understanding of them. Today we’re talking about the church.

So what exactly is the church, and why do we have the church? I think I’d better start with a point of clarification. You see, I’m talking about the church not a church. If I were talking about a church, I might be talking about a building, or an individual congregation. But I’m not. I’m talking about the church – around the world, the church of Jesus Christ, made up of people in all times and in all places. Another way we would make the distinction between the two is to refer to the universal church as the “Big ‘C’ Church,” meaning the one that might be capitalized in a sentence.

So I’ve already made one of my points when talking about the Big “C” Church. The church is a group of people. In your bulletin are the historic statements from our ancestor denominations, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church, and both statements agree on this. From the start, both statements say that the church is a community or a congregation. Both statements also include concepts of preaching and sacramental life, and this goes back to the earliest days of the church.

Some have identified the birth of the church as taking place on the day of Pentecost, when 3000 people were baptized after hearing Peter’s powerful testimony. In the New Testament, the Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which can also be translated as a gathering or assembly. From the very beginning, the church has been all about people coming together. And that is what helps us understand what I think is the answer to our question of why we have the church.

We have the church because God created us to be in community, and when we come together, we can accomplish so much more than we could individually. Together, we are able to know and to love God more profoundly and we are able to love and to serve others at a much greater level.

Bishop William Willimon and Stanley Hauerwas wrote that Christianity truly requires the experience of community. Although Americans tend to think of faith as a personal experience, spiritual growth is really a team sport. All of our ethical responses begin in the Christian community. Through the teaching, support, sacrifice, worship and commitment of the church, utterly ordinary people are enabled to do some rather extraordinary, even heroic acts, not on the basis of their own gifts and abilities, but rather by having a community capable of sustaining Christian virtue. The church therefore enables us to be better people than we could have been if left to our own devices.¹

One day, the writer Anne Lamott was asked why she makes her son go to church. She replied, “I make [him go] because I can. I outweigh him by nearly 75 pounds. But that is only part of it.

¹ Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 81.

The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. [People with a deep sense of spirituality] follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.² It is this kind of gathering that we want to ensure our children are a part of.

James Surowiecki wrote a book called “The Wisdom of Crowds.” In it he talks about the reality that group answers are often better and more precise than individual answers. He pointed to the popular game show, “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?” If you’ve seen the show, you know that contestants are given lifelines they can use if they aren’t sure about an answer. One lifeline is to phone a friend. Another is to poll the audience. In one version of the show, there was a lifeline where the contestant could ask an expert. One might think that the experts would be the best choice and, over a span of time, the experts were right 65% of the time, which is pretty good. But when the audience was asked, they were right 91% of the time. The group consistently got it better than an individual could, even if that individual was an expert. The same is true with the old guessing game where you try to guess the number of jelly beans in a jar. Individual responses could be well off the mark, but when you average the guesses, it always comes closer to the correct answer.

You see, when we come together as a community of faith, we become able to do more than we could on our own. Together, we are able to use our combined knowledge and wisdom to deepen our understanding of God. As a part of a group, we are able to have greater confidence in our faith journey, and we can be held accountable when we’re straying from the target.

All this would seem to make sense in light of the Gospel text we have today. The Gospel accounts really don’t have Jesus talking much about the church. But there is this section in the 17th chapter of John’s gospel when Jesus is praying just before he is arrested. His prayer can be divided into three parts. In the beginning, Jesus prays for himself. Next, he prays for the disciples that are there with him. Finally he prays for all those who will believe – that’s us...that’s the church! And it is in this third section that we find today’s scripture text.

So what does Jesus pray for when he’s thinking about us, the church? He prays for unity. In his prayer, he says “may they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” Jesus is asking that we would be as closely united together as he is with God. This is not just a little bit of unity, it’s complete unity.

Well, folks, how would you say we’re doing? Would you say we’re united as one? I’m not sure that we are.

It’s easy to see how divided we are outside the church. Male vs. female. Red states vs. blue states. Liberals vs. conservatives. Black vs. white. Rich vs. poor. Americans vs. immigrants. Gay vs. straight.

And here’s one that I’m very guilty of – OSU vs. Michigan.

² Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 100.

But divisions remain within the church, don't they. Did you know that there are over one thousand five hundred different Christian denominations? Some are variations on a theme, closely related divisions within a major denomination. As I was looking at all the varieties, I found a list of newly formed churches that was pretty interesting. See if you might find a home in one of these churches...

1. Potluck Assembly
2. Feelgood Fellowship
3. Clean Bathroom Bible Temple
4. Theology-Free Church
5. Bill Gates' Memorial Geek Orthodox Church
6. Church of the Perpetual Building Program
7. Comfortable Pew Family Center
8. Better Than the Rest Believer's Fellowship
9. Twist-and-Shout Revival Center
10. Seldom United Church³

Of course, these were just for fun, but we still have fifteen hundred denominations. How did it get that way? Well, some of the divisions were the result of disagreement on major theological disputes or other really important issues like slavery and race, but some of the divisions have been based on issues of power or personal preference.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't think different denominations are necessarily a bad thing. After all, we were all created as unique individuals, with our own tendencies and preferences. I just don't think that one church with one mandated worship style and one specific theology is what God desires for us, and this is one area where I think the United Methodist Church gets it right.

John Wesley used to like to quote a saying by St. Augustine that goes like this: In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity.

In essentials, unity. We must be united about what is essential. Things like our belief in God as revealed to us in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. In essentials, unity.

In non-essentials, liberty. In those things that are non-essential, we must be willing to live and let live. What kind of music is best for worship? What style of architecture should churches use? The answer? Whatever works best for the faith community you're talking about! In non-essentials, liberty.

In all things, charity. Friends, it's unfortunate, but we are overly-skilled in our ability to point out what makes us different. Therefore, we must learn how to uncover the ways we are alike, and celebrate our similarities rather than focusing on our differences! In all things, charity.

³ John Green, "Newly formed churches," *The Door*, March-April 2000, 15.

Yes, you could look at the Big “C” church today and say that we are woefully divided and falling way short of the hopes and dreams of God. But you could also look for signs of the kingdom coming, because they’re there.

I saw some literal signs that gave me hope when I was travelling in Great Britain in May of 2002. All around England, Scotland and Wales, I saw churches of all denominations with the same sign hanging outside that said, “One Church, One God, Jesus Christ, Worship Him Here.” According to one minister, it was an effort by the churches to “stick together and declare our unity before we became completely irrelevant.”⁴

Similarly, there are efforts within the American churches to join together. Strands of Methodism including the United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches are coming together in formal ways and finding agreement. Just this summer, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church approved an agreement of full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This means that all sacraments are fully recognized between the two churches and ministers of both denominations are welcome to preside in both churches. Ecumenical dialogues continue with most other major denominations as well.

Yes, there are signs of unity. There are signs of the coming of the Kingdom of God here on earth. The call to discipleship this morning is to discover what part you can play in bringing unity to the church and to do something about it. I encourage you this week to seek out a friend from another denomination, and talk with them about all the things that we have in common. Another thing you could do is to identify within yourself the things that you might hold against other denominations, and seek to overcome those things.

Friends, Jesus Christ is calling us to be one in community with each other, just as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are completely one in community with one another. Unity does not equal uniformity. We don’t all have to be completely alike. But we must find ways to come together. Let’s pray.

Lord, we do seek to be one. One with you, and one with others. Help us to see those things that can unite us rather than those things that divide us. Help us to be your church. Amen.

⁴ Carrie A. Moore Deseret Morning News http://www.redorbit.com/news/technology/659198/christian_churches_unite_in_solidarity_campaign/index.html, accessed 7/29/08.