

Gloria Dei Sermon 11/25/07  
Christ the King Sunday  
Jeremiah 23:1-6  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Luke 23:33--43

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Almost a century ago a debate raged within Christian theology concerning the necessity or the nonnecessity of the institutional church. A tough question was being asked, "Jesus preached a Kingdom-so why do we have the Church?" Certainly in the Western world, an ever-growing number of people are questioning the validity of any institutional church and are seeking to find God, moral guidance and to express themselves religiously outside the walls of the church.

The critique of the church has both theoretical and practical consequences. Theoretically, some people believe that the church has been compromised. They no longer believe that it is an institution that mediates god's grace. Some believe that involvement in a church brings the spiritual quest to a premature end. Churches demand an obedience that renders its members somewhat adolescent.

Practically speaking, people are voting with their feet. They simply are going to church less and less. Attendance and involvement are falling off drastically in the western world. So it is in Great Britain today that an average of only two per cent of the population attends church weekly. While attendance and activity drops, churches have remarkable staying power. People want to identify themselves with a certain label. They want the church to be there and to continue, even though they are not attending them. Research further shows that people who do not participate in the church are not angry with it, they do not have great philosophical or personal arguments with it. On a typical Sunday your neighbors are mowing the lawn, washing the car, visiting with family and friends, involved in all manner of sports activities, watching the NFL pre-game show, perhaps tuning in to a broadcast of a church service, or reading the Sunday paper. In reality, they are on sabbatical. They want a kingdom, but not a church. The church may have the water of life, but less and less people are coming to drink.

Certainly all of these realities point to a need for a better understanding of the church, its role and purpose. The writer to the Christians in Colossae provides for us a road map in understanding the church and the centrality of Christ as its head. As we celebrate Christ the King today, I would like to explore with you and invite you to join together with me in understanding the church as an apostolic community. Will you come along, just for a bit?

Before anything else the church is people. Long before there is mention of buildings or clergy or laity, institutions, creeds or moral codes, the church is a community of hearts and souls, previously separated by many things, coming together. Jesus formed a community around himself, gave it life, purpose and hope, then left it his spirit, his word and himself in the breaking of the bread and the offering of the cup.

What in the world is an apostolic community? What makes the church apostolic? Because there are so many misunderstandings about these questions, let's look at it from the backside and understand what the church is not. The church is not any of the following things.

The church is not like-minded individuals, gathering on the basis of mutual compatibility. This is a very common misunderstanding, but gathering as church has very little or nothing to do with liking each other or finding others with whom we are mutually compatible. The group of individuals who gathered around Jesus were not individuals who were mutually compatible at all. They came from different backgrounds and temperaments, had different visions of what Jesus was all about, were jealous of each other, and were, as scripture tells us, occasionally furious with each other. They loved each other, in the biblical meaning of the phrase, but they did

not necessarily like each other-like a church member who might say to another, "So and so, my love for you is entirely supernatural, of that I can assure you."

That is what it means to be the church. Too often we are disappointed in church because we find that there is such a diverse and motley collection of persons, some of whom do not like us and whom we would never pick to be our friends. If we go to church looking for friends and ideological soulmates and do not find them, it does not mean the church is wrong, but our expectations are. To be in apostolic community is not necessarily to be with others with whom we are emotionally, ideologically or otherwise compatible. Rather it is to stand, shoulder to shoulder and hand in hand, precisely with people who are very different from ourselves and, with them, hear a common word, say a common creed, share a common bread, offer a mutual forgiveness. All of these things help us bridge our differences and become a common heart.

Likewise, apostolic community is not a group of persons huddling in fear or loneliness against the world. In both John's gospel and in the book of Acts we see a kind of false community among the disciples before they received the Holy Spirit. They are described as "huddled in a room with the doors locked, out of fear." In that state, they were physically together, under one roof, in the same house, but not a real community. After the Spirit descends upon them at Pentecost, they burst forth from that room, never to see each other again, but they have genuine community.

Apostolic community is had when, on the basis of something more powerful than our fears, we emerge from our locked rooms and begin to take down the walls. Henri Nouwen, in his book **Making All Things New**, puts it this way. "When the Spirit descended upon the disciples huddling together in fear, they were free to move out of their closed room into the world. As long as they were assembled in fear they did not form community. But when they had received the Spirit, they became a body of people who could stay in communion with each other. When it is the Spirit of God and not fear that unites us as a community, no distance of time or place can separate us."

Apostolic community is not "family" in the psychological sense. There was once a young man who wanted to join a religious order. He constantly complained that the order was cold and lacked intimacy. Finally a counselor shared with him. "You are looking for a lover, not a religious community." We have often confused church community with family in the psycho-sexual sense. We speak of the church as a family, but it is not a family created by people joining together with children. Within that framework a whole range of intimate needs can be met that cannot be met in other kinds of families. Church community can never be a functional substitute for emotional and sexual intimacy. It is not intended to be. One shouldn't go to church looking for a lover.

Apostolic community is not a matter of one roof, one ethnicity, one denomination, one rulebook, or one book of common prayer. We can have all these things in common and not really be in community with others.

One of the things that apostolic community is often confused with, but is not, is the togetherness that is brought about by a common mission. A common mission demands a team effort, but it does not, of itself, make for apostolic community.

If apostolic community is not all of these, then what is it? If church community is not to take its foundation in like-mindedness, a shared fear, the need for intimacy in our lives, a common roof, a common identity, a common denomination, or a shared mission, on what basis does it exist? We are an apostolic community when we gather around the person of Christ and share his Spirit. What does it mean?

An analogy can be helpful here: Imagine a woman, whom we shall call Betsy, who has a heart the size of the Grand Canyon. She is gracious, loving, devoid of any prejudice, and with an understanding and empathy wide enough to encompass everything and everybody. Because she

is so loving, she has a very wide variety of friends and one night she decides to have a party and invite them all. She rents a large hall to hold everyone. And her guests begin to arrive. Men, women and children show up of every description, ideology, background, temperament, taste, social standing and religion. A curious mixture of persons fills the hall. Liberals and conservatives, fundamentalists and feminists, Promise keepers and New Agers, clergy types and the unchurched, animal rights activists and Ducks Unlimited members, the pro-life head and George Tiller, Tom Etheridge and Wild West World investors.

Given the mixture, there is a fair amount of tension in the air, but because Betsy is there, because she is in the center of the room, and because they respect who she is and what she stands for, everyone, for that night at least, is polite to one another and is a part of a certain spirit of tolerance, respect, decency, and charity to stretch them beyond how they would normally feel, think and act.

As you can imagine, such a gathering would work only while Betsy was actually present. Should she have to excuse herself and leave, or should persons get preoccupied in ways that would make them forget why they were there, you would soon have enough fireworks that would empty the room. This particular mix can only be brought together and kept together only around one person, Betsy. Everything depends upon her presence and upon those present having her wide empathy while they are in that presence, that is, upon being in her spirit.

That is the image of the church around Jesus Christ. Outside of a focus on his person and how we are drawn to spontaneously live when we sense his presence. We have angry fireworks and constant dissipation, as the state of our families, communities, nations and world gives ample testimony to. Nothing else, ultimately, holds us together.

Hence the basis for Christian community is gathering around the person of Jesus Christ and living in his Spirit. And that Spirit is not some vague blur or shapeless cloud somewhere. It is defined in scripture as joy, peace, love, patience, goodness, long suffering and fidelity. Living in these virtues is what binds us into community and that keeps us from being separated by distance, temperament, race, color, creed, social status, even death itself.

Given this criterion for apostolic community, we see that the church includes all persons who are called into community by the living Christ. To be the church means that we are to celebrate this Jesus who calls us to abundant life. It means that we will share real life together, we will pray together, we will celebrate our rites of passage together we are responsible to each other and open to each other as regards mutual correction and challenge, we are responsible together for the ministry of the church.

All of these things together, in essence, mean that, in in some form or another, we are mutually accountable to one another for our lives. We may still live in our private house and have our private bank accounts, but, once we belong to a church, we no longer fully own our lives. That is apostolic community. It is one that reflects the Christ around whom we gather and in whom we have life, real life, abundant life. And now to God be glory in the church. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.