

April 27 2014

Scripture Lessons ~ 1 Peter 1:3-9

Sermon *What is a Church?*

When you are on vacation, do you seek out a church? I always enjoy visiting different churches. It was a practice that was established in me when I was young. My family traveled when I was young. If we were already at our destination we would go to church with my aunts and uncles. But if we were somewhere enroute, we always stopped for church. We would then take a bulletin to our Sunday school teacher the following week, so that we could keep our perfect attendance. As an adult, I have visited many churches of several different denominations. As a seminarian, I was encouraged to visit Christian churches unlike our own sometimes worship services in languages other than our own, and sometimes to visit churches that were not Christian so that I might have a broader understanding of Christian worship. I have attended Jewish services, Sikh services and even Muslim services, just to see how other people do things, it is a very educational experience. As a preacher I have stood before as many as 600 and as few as a few dozen. There are churches when we visit them that we notice and there are things that many churches do things alike. Members of the clergy act like members of the clergy the world over. Churches act the same in many ways. Most of them have covered dish suppers for fellowship, or something like them.

But frankly, there is much they do not have in common. They gather in vastly different circumstances. There is no common architecture, they all worship with different orders. Some of them have beautiful liturgies, some have none.

Some of the churches where I have visited seem to have everything. Some people who attend smaller churches may even think that of us. We have a beautiful sanctuary, a pleasant outside appearance a loving congregation, what more could we want, or need, to have church?

I heard the late Robert Schuller of the Crystal Cathedral said the most important asset of that church was its large, accessible and convenient parking lot... Granted, good parking is great, but what else would you need, other than a good parking lot, to have a church?

Today's gospel gives us a picture of a church that has no organ, not even an old upright piano. No choir, not even a pastor. In fact, it's a picture of the church at its worst, the first miserable little conglomeration ever to take upon itself the name "church".

Reading of John 20: 19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you.' As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven then; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

It's the disciples of Jesus gathered after his resurrection. Look at them! For long, painstaking chapters in John's gospel, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for his departure. He has gone over and over his commandments to love one another, to be bold, to trust him, to be ready to follow him at all costs.

Somebody wasn't paying attention. Look at them, cowering like frightened little rabbits behind closed, bolted doors.

They were to be the ones walking confidently out into the world, full of the Holy Spirit, announcing the Easter triumph of God. Look at them now hunched down, cowering; hoping that nobody in town will know that they're there. Here some have said, is the church at its worst – 'scared, disheartened and defensive.'

We might ask, "What kind of an advertisement might this church put in the Saturday newspaper to attract new members?" "The friendly church where all are welcome"?? Hardly. Locked doors are not a sign of hospitality. "The church with a warm heart and a bold mission."?? Forget it. This is the church of sweaty palms and shaky knees.

Could this even be called a church? Not only is there no sanctuary, no pulpit, no choir, no parking lot, there is more significantly, no plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing.

When the laity has been asked what they were looking for in a church they have consistently said, "Friendliness." The number two thing they are looking for in a church is 'bold, interesting preaching.' No one ever replies, 'locked doors,' or 'frightened members' or 'fear'.

Here is a church with nothing going for it except... Except that, when it gathered, the risen Christ pushed through the locked door, threw back the bolt, and stood among them.

Maybe that's every church. Maybe even the largest and smallest churches will continue to be strong as long as Jesus stands among them.

And most of us would be timid, confused, cowering, and failures in our church experience without the presence of the risen Christ.

I learned that long ago. Sometimes I have prepared what I thought were excellent sermons. As I have delivered my sermons I have looked at the congregation and saw closed eyes, yawns, blank stares. On other weeks I have come with a sermon that I thought was embarrassing to give. It said nothing new. It was the same old stuff just wrapped differently. Part of the way through my sermon I have looked up from my text to see eyes that show interest in what I am saying... Now I can only chuckle to myself knowing that I saw the power of the Holy Spirit at work, it wasn't me, it must have been the Holy Spirit. And God must have a sense of humor as it becomes evident to me that it is not the power of my preaching that has ever touched people, but the movement of the Holy Spirit among you at the most unlikely of times. In fact, sometimes I think that the careful planning and preparing is just another form of the disciples locked doors. We plan the service, proofread the bulletin so that we can get it all fixed, planned, tied down. This can be the death of the service.

But sometimes, by the grace of a living God, the Holy Spirit slips through our closed doors, our plodding through the bulletin, and there is worship, worship not of our own creation, but worship as a gift, a gift from God. And we take off our shoes in awed wonder, for we have become church.

If you want to see us, stripped of our sacred trappings, our pretenses peeled away, and then look here in the 20th chapter of John – a pitiful huddle of timid souls hanging onto one another behind our locked doors. Without the presence, the presence which makes our human gatherings the church of God, this is who we are, timid and cowering.

The good news is that it was to the church, which was hardly church, that the living, risen Christ came saying “Peace be with you.” Into this busy, buzzing void there was a voice, a presence. Then Jesus breathed on them, giving them the Holy Spirit, and sent them out into the world.

You put these gifts together and they are the church. To the church which had nothing, he gave everything. Spirit. Mission. Forgiveness.

We are church, not because of the building we've built and cared for, not because of the choir, the organ, the preaching, or the covered-dish dinners. We are the church because to us, even to us, Jesus came and gave us these gifts of spirit, mission and forgiveness, commissioning us to give them to the whole world in his name.

That's why we are called church.

A respected preacher told the story of the first church he served. He said on his first visit to the church he found the front door padlocked. The padlock had been placed there by the sheriff who told him he put it there because at the last board meeting a fight had broken out; people began to take things from the church, things that had been given as a memorial in remembrance of Aunt Mary Jane or Grandpa. People wanted those keepsakes themselves. They didn't want the church to keep them because the church was made up of those 'other' cantankerous fools. The year he served there was the worst 3 years of his life. On his last Sunday he was glad to think that he never had to return to such a rebellious people. Years later, he met the pastor serving that church at the time. The new pastor had nothing but glowing things to say about the church and its membership. The first pastor wondered if there was some mistake so he told the new pastor about his experiences at that church. "What happened?" the old pastor asked. "I don't know," was the reply. "One Sunday, things just sort of came together. It wasn't anything in particular. It's just that when the service was done, and we were on our way out, we knew that Jesus loved us and had plans for us. Things fairly took off after that."

I tell you what I think happened. I think the church got intruded upon. I think someone greater than either pastor knocked the lock off that door, kicked it open, and offered them peace; the Holy Spirit and forgiveness and now they are a 'church'.

Church isn't the pastor's hard work, or your earnest effort, our long range planning, or heavy duty giving. Church is a gift, a visitation, and intrusion of the living Christ standing among us.

Let us pray... Almighty God, in overcoming death and rising, your Son opened to us the gates of live everlasting. Moreover, in returning to his disheartened disciples, he blessed us and empowered us to be his people

in the world. Grant us again a fresh sense of the risen Christ among us.
Amen