

What I'd like for us to do today for Pentecost is to reflect on what the church is. That is ecclesiology: reflecting on what the church is. Because we do well to think from time to time of what church is and what God wants the church to be.

Let me tell you a story. Not too long before I moved to Atlanta, I was invited to dinner at my neighbors' home, and no sooner than I accepted their invitation than I realized that I had a session meeting to moderate the same night. Fortunately, they are late eaters, though as am I, so we arranged that we would meet for drinks and appetizers early, which always makes for a more interesting session meeting. Then I would moderate my meeting, and after we wrapped up at the church, I would simply come back for dinner, a sort of all evening affair. I was to call when I left the church so that they could steam the asparagus. Now my neighbors are gourmet cooks, so I was sitting through session waiting anxiously for the opportunity to break away as soon as possible to return to my halibut. When I finally did get back to their home, in the course of making my apologies for my absence to the other guests was surprised to learn they were interested in what I had been doing. We began to talk about church and I asked my hosts about the small church they have been attending, a sister Presbyterian Church that is just down the street from where I lived at the time, a church with a story not dissimilar from Morningside in that it made the news for its most remarkable growth as a worshipping body. A friend of mine, Dr. Charles MacDonald, a retired minister in his late seventies had gone to be their supply pastor in order to help them through the tough task of bringing the ministry of that congregation to its end. When it was announced that the church would close its doors, some visitors asked if it was too late to join. The congregation then got a little too

excited about what was going on and well, now they are thriving congregation. But at the time of that dinner party, they were just getting their heads above water as a congregation. Knowing that my friends had been attending this church, I asked them about it, wanting to know a bit about what makes it tick, about their understanding of church; their ecclesiology. I found their answer most interesting. It turned out that they had joined this small Presbyterian Church that same morning. “That’s wonderful”, I said, “tell me about how you chose to join this church.”

The wife of the couple began to tell me their story. They had both grown up in predominantly Catholic cultures and had been baptized into the church of their culture, the Catholic Church, and since she had been previously married and could no longer take communion in the Catholic Church as a divorcee, they chose to join an Episcopal church in their community but soon burnt out and remained unchurched for a time.

“That’s quite a jump from Catholic to Presbyterian”, I observed, to which she replied, “I couldn’t take that Catholic guilt anymore.”

At this point, I was thoroughly intrigued, given that I’ve always thought that the Presbyterians had guilt sewn up.

So she continued, “We read about this church in the paper, and thought we ought to give it a try, we’ve always supported the underdog after all, and we want to be in church, so we drove over on Sunday morning, and we just sat in the car, going back and forth, should we go in? Should we not go in...back and forth, back and forth.”

At this point her husband interjected, and I can’t quote him directly here because there are certain words we don’t use in church so I’m going to clean him up just a touch, “**whatever**, we’re going to church.”

And so she picked back up, and said, “You know, he wasn’t feeling that well this weekend, and I asked him yesterday whether or not we needed to cancel dinner tonight, and I would have called you if he hadn’t gotten better, but I had already resolved to myself that I was going to church today, even if I had to go by myself. I just need it. It’s working for me now...for years, I was the person who showed up with six trays of lasagna for the homeless ministry in my church, and I made it from scratch for them, a labor of love, even though I wouldn’t personally be the one to serve it, and I don’t want to be selfish, but where I am now, I just need the church to minister to me.”

To read the story of Pentecost in Acts is to think about what it means to be church. We do need to think about what we believe about church so that when we speak we can say what we mean, and be clear about what it is that we are up to. We need to think about our ecclesiology so that our ecclesiology says something about God.

The Acts Pentecost story sets us in motion to consider how God chooses to continue to call a covenant community into being to teach the world a bit about who God is. That is, after all, the historic understanding of the function of ancient Israel, to be God’s people so that the people who encounter them can know something about the God who chose Israel to show who God is. In the Acts Pentecost story, the scope of God’s chosen people is exploded dramatically to include all the followers of God who have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, the gathered people were shown that God is still creating, still calling, still making covenants with God’s people. The wind, the holy Ruach, the spirit of God present in creation is manifested again as God, the living God, ever the creator, creates the church.

Bishop Will Willimon writes of this passage: “The Spirit blows where it will in Acts, connected with the act of baptism and laying on of hands but refusing to be bound by later ecclesiastical definitions and conventions.” God’s Spirit blows on the church, calling it into being. And so regarding Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, Willimon concludes: “It is the God who keeps promises that matters in Peter’s sermon, so that when the sermon ends, no one is in doubt that there is a God who is busy in the world.”¹

Willimon’s assessment of the nature of the church at Pentecost both troubles and excites me. As a biblical interpreter myself, as we all are, it excites me to think of God as dynamic, alive, still acting. I love that part about God being busy in the world. It excites me but it also scares me because it means that I don’t get to decide what constitutes church. Further to that point, that part about the Spirit refusing to be bound by later ecclesiastical definitions and conventions, well that’s a little troubling too. That part is a little difficult for me, because it puts the responsibility to look for God’s action right back in front of the church. We can’t say once and for all what God is doing because God is doing a new thing, all the time. Just ask that congregation who thought that God was done with them, who thought that that they were closing their doors for the last time in two weeks... Ask my friends who are learning that the church can minister to them in ways they never imagined. Ask anyone who has ever wanted the church to be one way, solidly reliably one way, and finding that it wasn’t, or couldn’t be, and then found that in failing to meet one expectation the church ministered in some surprising new way...

Presbyterians love order, though and the problem with all this messy Pentecostal creativity is that it may leave us wondering, just a bit at least, about what this says about the nature of the church and the nature of God. And so I would like us to consider for a

¹ Willimon, William. *Acts* in *Interpretation*. P 38-39

moment what an ecclesiology, an understanding of the church that reflects a *living* God looks like. If a *fixed* God would lead us to a fixed ecclesiology, then it follows that a living God would lead us to a living ecclesiology, and therein lies the challenge of the Pentecost text for us this day: can we embrace a *living* ecclesiology. Can we embrace an ecclesiology of the *living* God?

Perhaps more relevant, can we understand an ecclesiology of a living God? Can we understand that the God that Peter preached about that day, the God who pours out God's Spirit on men and women, who gives visions and prophecies and portents – that is our God?

If who *we* are as a church is shaped by who God is, by who God reveals himself to be, rather than having our God shaped by who we are, then we are most faithful in seeking to be church.

Well, perhaps a theological example will help make this clearer: our doctrine proclaims a triune God. Do we ever stop to think about what that says about the church? If when we speak of the Trinity, we say that God is three and yet one, one and yet three, each member of the Godhead coequal, each participating in the work of the other, distinct but not separate, three hypostases bound together in love. High sounding words, to be sure, but if we decode them, what we're really saying is that Christians would value others as themselves, asking no one to lose their identity, their distinctiveness in order to be a part of the church, participating in each other's lives and ministries, not separate, many members, bound together in love...

And what does it mean if we say we worship a living God?

If we embrace an understanding of a church of a living God, we are going to have to embrace the messiness of Pentecost over and over again because a living God never stops working on us and preparing us to show the world who God is. Because the living God who defined himself as a living, loving community and calls us to show the world a living, loving community.

Writing about church, Frederick Buechner cautions us: “we do well to keep in mind that the idea of becoming the church wasn’t the disciples’ idea. It was Jesus’ idea. It was Jesus who made them a church...They came together because Jesus called them to come together. That is what the Greek word *ekklesia* means, from which we get our word *church*. It means those who have been called out...”²

Perhaps this is just one of those concepts that really lives in anecdotal form. So Let me share another story with you: my colleague Richard Cromie told this story at a Committee on Ministry meeting, not a place I usually look to find inspiration. As Dr. Cromie tells the story, it’s about a little boy raised in a Christian family who went home one day after school and informed his mother than he wanted to be Jew. The young man’s parents were appropriately taken aback as they were active in their local church, taking him weekly to Sunday School and Worship, as Dr. Cromie said, they were surprised, to put it mildly. With boy’s permission they decided to consult with the grandparents, one of whom is a Presbyterian Minister. The grandparents immediately began to ask questions of the boy: “why would you want to give up Jesus?” “Oh, I don’t want to give up Jesus,” the boy sagely answered.

“You would have to give up Christmas and Easter?” they added...

“Oh, I don’t want to give up Easter and Christmas,” he countered.

² Buechner, Frederick. Secrets in the Dark. P148

On and on it went, question, answer, point, counterpoint, until finally, the boy's grandfather asked "Why do you want to be a Jew?"

Dr. Cromie interjects that he has always considered it the best way to elicit good communication from someone who is doing something unexpected is not to go on the offensive with objections and arguments to persuade the other person, particularly when that person is a child, but rather, to ask *why*?

"Why do you want to be a Jew?" His grandfather asked. The boy's voice grew softer.

"Well, you see, I have a friend named David. He is the only Jew in our whole class. I just thought it would be nice if he had me as a friend, so the two of us could be Jewish together. And then if anyone ever wanted to pick on a Jewish boy, if they told him that he and his family were wrong and that he had to switch to being a Christian to get to heaven, then, then there would be two of us."³

That's an ecclesiology of the Living God! That's an understanding of the church that sees it as an extension of God's love for us. That's an ecclesiology that reflects a living God that defines himself in community and love and calls us to do the same. That's an understanding of God that grasps that God is with us, and so we are with others.

At Pentecost, God did a new thing. Actually, God did a really old thing, the same old/new thing that God has been up to since creation: breathing life into us in a new way, and if we believe God is alive, and we believe we live in God's eternal care, well, we can live knowing that the God who is alive and invites us to new life can be trusted to keep doing what he always has done.

So how is God doing that today?

³ Cromie, Richard. Paraphrased and quoted from *The Final Test of Faith*.

I could tell you how I see it. I see it when the church decides that it cares enough about the effects of poverty and the havoc wreaked by natural disasters that there is no alternative but to go Haiti ourselves and help. That says something about what we believe about a living, loving God.

I see it when the church stacks up tin-foil pans in the narthex and invites people to go and feed the hungry because that is what Jesus told us to do. And I see it when congregation members give their vacation homes and their hams and their research and professional skills to a silent auction and in one afternoon, our youth raise over six thousand dollars to go to Arkansas and learn about what it is like to live in the two-thirds world that lives on a whole lot less than we do.

And I don't just see it in our mission efforts. I see it when our classes and small groups get together to learn and to pray and to share each other's company and grow together in faith.

I see it when elders and deacons give hours and hours of time serving the organizational needs of the church so that we can function smoothly and attend to our business. And I'm going to see it this fall when our Youth Group starts meeting regularly and some of you, and you don't who you are yet, are going to give up your Sunday nights to come and be youth advisors and eat with the kids and play games and learn. Be forewarned, the Holy Spirit will be calling soon...

But that's just how I see it. How do you see the living, loving God creating and recreating church, making all things new?

But maybe the better question is this: when you see the Spirit, what are you going to do?

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.