

There is nothing quite like titling a sermon “what is church for?” to leave a pastor with a certain amount of circumspection the week before.

Indeed, as I was in this somewhat circumspect mood I read a paragraph that struck me with a certain chill. It was from John Dominic Crossan’s book on the Lord’s Prayer that a small group of us are reading together, and this is what it said: “Zeus was a mighty God whose power was carried on the pikes of Alexander’s phalanxes from the plains of Macedonia to the mountains of the Hindu Kush. Then one day he died. Nobody killed him. He just became irrelevant. Jupiter was a mighty God, carried on the swords of Rome’s legions from the shores of the Irish sea to the banks of the Euphrates River.

Then one day he died. Again, nobody killed him. He simply became irrelevant.”¹

Naturally, you see why a pastor might find this a bit chilling. A question lingers underneath that quote that is on the mind of anyone who notes that the world is changing – the hegemony of the church to dominate Sunday morning is over. Social pressure to attend church is gone. As I kvetched in the *Morningside Messenger* a while back, marathons are now run on Sundays to avoid inconveniencing businesses and communities on Saturdays. What if we’re only the most recent idea to find itself on history’s junk heap?

I mean, what are we for? I know what the great ends of the church are – you can read about them in our Book of Order if you’re suffering from insomnia.

¹ John Dominic Crossan, The Greatest Prayer. HarperOne, NY, 2010. P100

It reads, “The great ends of the Church are: The proclamation of the Gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”²

Don’t those just sound wonderful? I don’t know that we have a sweet clue what they mean, but isn’t the verbiage lovely?

I have a confession to make. The whole introduction to this sermon was intended to be a straw-man. You know what a straw-man is? It’s a weak argument that someone schooled in rhetoric sets up so that it can be summarily and completely swatted down so that the argument knocking it down looks irrefutable.

So it would go something like this: Zeus died because he wasn’t relevant. Jupiter died because he wasn’t relevant. Church died... oh, no, church can’t die because church will always be relevant. We have the *great ends* to prove it.

I was going to swat that idea down like a gnat and then I realized it’s not a straw-man at all.

It would be very easy for church to lose its relevance. I’ve seen it. I know what it looks like.

Many of you know that I served a church in Scotland on a pulpit exchange years ago. The Scottish pastor and I swapped pulpits, cars, houses, and congregations for a few months. The church I served was in central Scotland, just outside of Glasgow, and they are doing absolutely wonderful work. They are a community center, they have a congregation that is devoted to each other and to doing good works in their community.

² Book of Order. Published by the Office of the General Assembly, 2011 P5

But make no mistake about it: to me as an outsider looking in, the church in Scotland appears to be dying. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise, the church on the continent is for all intents and purposes, on life support.

Simply put, culture has moved on.

Oh sure, there are congregations that are thriving, just as Morningside is, and to be fair to my Scottish clergy friends, they are working as hard as they ever have, and I have no doubt that the Gospel itself will never go away. But the church is on hard times. Google "Churches for Sale in Scotland" and you'll see what I mean. St. Stephen's Edinburgh. Burnbank Church in Hamilton. Old High Church in Kilmarnock.

They have names. They have places. People loved them; they were baptized, married, buried and lived in them. They gave their time and treasure to these churches. But of course, every word that I have said could be said about the church in America as well. Before we go any further, I want to be clear that I don't consider churches that have closed to be failures. Not by a long shot. Any body that has given sustenance to people, provided a place for living with joy and sorrow in community established by God can never be considered a failure.

But it does make me tremendously mindful of our absolute and utter dependence upon the Holy Spirit to sustain us.

That is, of course, what Pentecost is about, after all – the work of the Holy Spirit in calling the church into being and sustaining it down through the ages.

That is why the church can never rest easily – we can never assume that we can drift along and all will be well. The church is sustained by the Holy Spirit and God uses us as the means by which the Holy Spirit does its work in the world.

The church is sustained by the Holy Spirit because otherwise we wouldn't have made it this far... how could an organization that is dependent upon word of mouth to transmit its message, dependent entirely upon the benevolence of its members to sustain its work, how could this type of organization keep on going on, year after year, century after century, millennia after millennia?

Think about it! Whatever we have to say it has been handed down from two thousand years ago.

That doesn't just happen.

The Holy Spirit blew through the church at Pentecost – that's why the chancel is swathed in red today, to remember the tongues of fire that rested on the head of each believer there in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost day. It may seem odd for me to say this, but I don't believe the particulars of what happened next are nearly as important for us at this moment so much as the reality that it was *the Spirit who enabled God's people to do what needed to be done*.

And that is still true.

Where the church is thriving it is because the Spirit of God has brought people to do what needs to be done.

When we are doing what God needs to have done in the world, we don't ever need to worry about relevancy.

And what needs to be done in the world?

Well, we have the *great ends* to keep us busy...

I am being quite serious, but I don't think anyone uses the language of "The Great Ends of the Church" anymore. They're from 1910 and they sound like it.

Let's see if we can bring them up to date and perhaps make them a little shorter as well.

The great ends of the church, that thing that God needs to have done in the world – is *to live as if grace is true*.

You know what grace is, I've told you before and I'll tell you again, it's the unearned, unmerited, unconditional love of God.

God doesn't love us because of something we've done. God doesn't love us because we're attractive or smart or hardworking. And God's love doesn't change, its unconditional.

If we live as if this is true, we are living the great ends of the church.

What is church for? It is to live as if grace is true.

Now if we live as if grace is true, it is going to mark us in a few ways.

If grace is true, then we are going to treat other people like they are God's good creation.

This one takes care of the "isms." We encounter a lot of "isms" in life. There's sexism, racism, elitism, and then we get into things that don't end in "ism" but are just exactly the same – homophobia comes to mind but there are others – I'll let you fill in the blanks.

But if grace is true – and the church is living like it – there's no room in the kingdom of God for the "isms," because they don't treat people like God loves them. Pretty straightforward, no? We can't be church, claiming to be doing *God's* work if we think we're better than anybody. If anyone's counting, that's the preservation of the truth.

If grace is true, then we have to be fair to ourselves as well.

I cannot tell you the number of deeply serving, kind people I have met who are absolutely hell on themselves. But if God's love is unconditional, unearned and unmerited, cut it

out. We're not allowed to devalue ourselves if God loves us. And, I might add, that covers a world of behaviors that have tremendous potential to do damage to ourselves. And if grace is true, then we have real community. Here's how that works: God loves you, God loves me, we love God – we call that church. And that means we gather together to be fed; to be allowed to bring God's healing to each other. You can't reach out to me to offer me God's healing touch on my life when I'm going through a hard time if I'm not present with you. And vice versa. We gather together week in and week out so that by the power of our presence with each other we are able to touch one another with God's power. That's the maintenance of divine worship, by the way.

And on the topic of healing, we have to gather and seek God's healing upon our lives so that we can in turn bring healing to the world. Did you know that's what mission is? All the stuff we try to do for mission –maybe it feels sometimes like there's just one more thing we need to bring – the canned goods, the starch for 30, the pajamas, the checks – we're bringing them so that we can participate in God's healing work in the world. God is using us to bring the things that bring healing! I have chapel time with our preschool three and four year olds once a month. We read a story, sing some songs, have a prayer – and the preschool children brought deodorant to chapel last Wednesday, isn't that wonderful?

It is wonderful because God knows that people need deodorant! And toothpaste, and can-openers.

Oh, I get that this may sound a little idealistic, a little airy-fairy, like some deodorant is going to solve the problems of substandard housing, substandard mental health-care, and just flat out bad luck that beats people down, but if we are living as if grace is true, then

what our preschoolers are doing is nothing less than the exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.

As long as we speak a word of grace to a hurting world, we need never worry about relevance.

And yes, this is completely impractical.

But it is how God is working redemption in the world. And it is the Holy Spirit drawing, tugging, pulling, cramming us forward to be God's people.

And here's the truth of it all: every one of us will need to see redemption sometime.

That's the difference between believing in Zeus or Jupiter and following the Christian faith – God's grace is the healing word that brings redemption.

I think Anne Lamott puts it better than I do with this story:

A police officer was driving his beat and he noticed a young girl in distress. What was clear was that she was lost. So he stopped the car, and got out, and said, "little girl, I will take you home if you will tell me your address." Well, she couldn't remember her address, and she was inconsolable. So the officer got her in the car and said, "we'll just drive around and maybe you will remember it." Well, they drove and drove and she couldn't remember it, she just couldn't remember it. The longer they drove the more upset she became because in her young mind, she was never going to get home. And then there was a moment that was perfect, pure peace, relief flooded into her eyes, and she said, "you can let me out now. I see the steeple of my church, and I know the way home from here."

That is what church is for.

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

