

Sermon Hebrews We Are the Church - All Together April 15, 2007
11:1-3, 8-10, 29, 32-34 12:1-2, 12-14 I Cor. 12:4-12, 20, 26-31

The Church - What is the Church? What is the Christian Church? What is this Church? Who are we? What are we? Why are we? What's our purpose, our reason for being? Even after nearly 2000 years of history, and our own 136 years in this place - good questions to consider. Not every Sunday - but on this Heritage Sunday - for sure. Why are we here? Please pray with me.

Lord - may the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of these your faithful and loving people, be acceptable in your sight, and your good word to us in Christ this day. Amen.

What is the Church of Jesus Christ? Why is it? Or - the Presbyterian Church, or The Orchard Lake Community Church, Presbyterian? What are we? I am the Church, you are the Church, we are the Church together. And that Means? We all together ... are... what?

Legally - A non-profit religious organization in the State of Michigan. A tax free organization of people in a particular place who worship God.

Though a cynic might say - we are a group of weak minded frightened people huddled together hoping for a heavenly answer to their earthly problems, who should be spending their time solving their problems by themselves. The cynic would say.

Or - maybe the oldest answer is still the best... A fellowship of believers in God and in Jesus Christ God's son.

Or - as the pastor of a fast growing new Church said - a church is a community of people who are learning how to be certain kinds of people wherever they find themselves, so they can do whatever it is they do in the name of the lord Jesus. (Rob Bell)

And - Scott read these words this morning about the Church... Now there are varieties of gifts and services and activities - but it is the same spirit, and Lord and God who activates all of them in everyone - each is given the manifestation of the spirit for the common good - you are the body of Christ - and individually members of it.

That's what and who and why the Church is - and why we are the Church. Those were the Apostle Paul's words. He wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else - and Paul may be more responsible than anyone for what the Christian Church looks like.

The body of Christ. But - I began to really understand for myself what the Christian Church should be in Sunday School - more years ago than I want to Count. I learned what the Church is from an old Sunday School rime. Here is the Church and here's the steeple - open the doors and see all the people.

And - a little later in my life, Avery and Marsh put these words together that say it even better. The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the Church is the people. I am the Church. You are the Church. We are the Church together. All around the world, all who follow Jesus, we are the Church, together.

Paul says the Church is the Body of Christ - and every member counts. And Avery and Marsh put it to song. And - nearly 40 years ago early in my ministry I had two experiences that confirmed for me what I learned in Sunday School and from the song.

My first lesson was from Dr. Elam Davies, Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago - and named in the 1970's one of the 10 great preachers in American, and he was my boss. And he told a number of young ministers this story.

He had just graduated with Highest Honors from Oxford Univ. in England and had begun studying for the ministry. He was assigned to work in a small church both to help the church and get practical experience. He arrived at the church and was met by the Clerk of Session - that would be Sandy Crane in our Church. And the clerk welcomed him and said let me show you where we need help and where you can best learn about the Church.

And he walked Elam Davies into the Sunday School area - past the Adult classes and the Youth Classes, right to the Kindergarten Class. And before Elam Davies, highest honor graduate of Oxford, could say a word about wasting his brilliance on kindergartners - the clerk said - Mr. Davies, Jesus said, Let the little children come to me and forbid them not.

Mr. Davies - faith begins at a very early age. If you can teach these young ones about God and God's love for them in Christ, then... maybe you can also be a worthy preacher.

And I hope I have never forgotten how vitally important it is what is happening not only up here - but down there every Sunday and every Wednesday.

A second kind of awakening experience. It was Christmas eve. Just a couple of minutes before the worship service. The Pastor's wife was in the sanctuary with the choir. The Pastor was in the nursery with his own young child, and three or four other young ones - waiting for the child care worker to arrive.

Fully robed in Christmas eve splendor - changing a diaper - the Pastor could not leave the children to find help. And there was some question about whether there would be a worship service or not. And the Care Giver Arrived. And the message was - who is important, really important?

Two experiences - very different - and - with the same central message for me...What is the Church?

Yes - the Church, the Body of Christ, is God's chosen way of being most clearly present and known in the world. The Church is the Body of Christ. It is the sum of all the parts - all the people - who make up the Church. And like the body, the Church can only function best when all its parts work together - each part doing its part. Stub a toe - a missing Child Care worker for example - and the whole body can only limp along. No matter how grand the choir may be. Teach children poorly and the grandest of organ sounds or preacher's words will fall on deaf ears.

Yes - surely - Church or no Church, God's presence is present to us in the wonders and splendors of nature. Who hasn't - almost instinctively - said with awe - O My God - in the midst of a powerful storm or an ocean shore sunset or from a mountain top view of the earth - or up close and personal at the moment of birth or the moment of death. My God - what a world of wonder. Who hasn't been stunned to silence and reverence by God's presence in God's Creation?

But all such awe and wonder still would leave us wondering what to do about it all - all the daily stuff of life, - did we not have - not only the wonder of nature, but the wonder of God's word to us in Jesus Christ.

Because.. Because life, your life and mine, is very much about bringing together the awesome power of God visible in nature, with some understanding of how we can best live out our lives in harmony with God's created order.

Jesus Christ is God's presence for human beings in human history. And the Church is the re-celebration of this truth over and over and over again. When two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus said, I am there also. We are, at our best, as a church, God's presence being made known in God's world.

And when we are at our best we are a functioning body with all its parts working together. And sometimes, sometimes, that actually happens. In spite of all our unique gifts and personalities, our personal preferences and prejudices, our individual flaws and shortcomings, sometimes - we are the church.. Christ's body, Christ's presence. Not a building. Not a steeple, but God's people, doing God's will, in God's world. And - it isn't easy.

Because each one of us has opinions feelings and ideas - and we will not ever all agree on anything completely. Still - it is all of us - all of us together - putting our gifts and talents to work together, who are the Church - the Body of Christ - God's presence in the world.

Three weeks ago we made an important decision as a church. Maybe the most important decision in the last 30 years. We voted to update, substantially improve, and enlarge our facilities. We voted to build in order to continue to share - through our ministries and mission efforts, the Good News of God's love, in the best ways we can for years and years to come.

And - it wasn't unanimous. As significant a majority as it was, better than three quarters of those voting, it wasn't unanimous, and many members were not present to vote.

Still - we acted faithfully, as any democratic group of people should, absolutely according to the rules - offering everyone the chance to come and to vote.- And nearly twice as many voted as normally vote in the annual meeting or the election of officers. We voted.

And now - the challenge is before us more clearly than it usually is - the challenge is before us - to be the body of Christ... to be a Church.

Day in and day out we always have our individual views of things. We are different parts of this body, with different gifts and skills and ideas and even beliefs. And Paul says - yes - that's the way God made it to be. Individuals, who, never the less, are formed together into the Body of Christ - the church.

We know some of our differences now - a bit better now than before the vote. But this church, that has over the past 136 years been a presence for Christ in this Community.... This Church that has done so many different things - and well - This Church that has offered people many different ways to express their faith - This Church is the body of Christ... different parts all knit together by faith.

Some serve and find their greatest enjoyment in the Music - where some member's passion lies. Other find their focus is Christian Education, where they commit so much energy and effort. For some it is the Mission work that has ever strong support, but not of all...

And so... This Church is the same Church it was before any vote - hundreds of God's good people, uniquely gifted individuals, drawn together by the Spirit of Christ, into this particular fellowship of faith - finding others either very much like us, or not so very different from us, and - working together to accomplish more good things than any of us could accomplish on our own.

That's the Church .The Church is not a building, the Church is not a steeple, the Church is the people, unique individual people, God gifted in different ways, called together by the Spirit, to be the Body of Christ in this place and this time.

All of us sharing our own gifts, as we have, teaching Sunday School, or singing or playing in one of the choirs, or serving as an officer or Stephen minister, or usher, or greeter, taking part in one of the local or traveling mission projects, working on rebuilding together, or the rummage sale, or the Blood Drive, or South Oakland Shelter, or VBS.... Some of us giving to FISH, or the Deacons Fund... because we care about those things more than other things.

And some have, well over half of us have, and hopefully more will have soon, also given to help with the Building to Share project.

And in all these ways, each of us plays a vital role in the ongoing day by day witness this part of the Body of Christ has to make - the witness we can make to making this world more nearly the kind of place God wants it to be - God's kingdom - on earth as it is in heaven.

Yes - we are the body of Christ - we are God's presence in the world. We are the Church. I am the Church. You are the church. We are the church together. Here at Orchard Lake, and all around the world, all who follow Jesus. We are the Church, together.

Please pray with me. Thank you, Lord, for your gift to us of the Church, and your gift of us to the Church. Thank you for your call and the working of your spirit, that binds us together, as different as we are, into one fellowship in Christ, the Lord and Savior of us all. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor

The Apostle Paul - maybe no one is more responsible for what the Christian Church looks like than Paul -