

Sermon Preached March 22, 2015
Year B, Lent 5
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

While at a party, a pastor was speaking with a man. "I never go to church," boasted the man. And the reason I don't go is because there are so many hypocrites there." "Oh, don't let that keep you away," replied the pastor with a smile. "There's always room for one more."

What exactly is Church? There are many opinions on the matter. Like the man in the joke, there are those who believe church is a place where flawed people believe themselves to be perfect. People who say one thing Sunday morning and act other ways the rest of the week. And certainly, there is some truth to that. We proclaim in church our ideals, for instance "love our enemies," "do not judge others" and the rest of week imperfectly try to make it happen as best we can.

Others believe church is a place of perfect people who have God all figured out, and that they themselves are therefore ineligible to attend. I can't tell you how many times I've heard the words "I can't come to church. I'm so bad, lightening would probably strike if I tried to walk in the door." But in reality, church is composed of broken people trying to sort out God, life, and spirituality in community. There is nobody who is too imperfect to belong to church. We've all been there.

Others believe church is a place of mindless robots who can't think for themselves. People who are too weak to handle life on their own. People who have been suckered into belonging to this institution, the church, which tells them what to believe and where to send their money. While on the contrary, church is made up of strong, intelligent, successful people who have found that life makes more sense and has more meaning in relationship with God and others.

There are others who believe the church is a service provider. They call the parish when they need a wedding. They expect to pay their fee and get their sacrament. It often comes as a shock to those who have no relationship with the parish, and readily admit not wanting to have a relationship with the parish, that they could be turned down. But the reality is, being part of a church is being part of a family. Just as you don't pay a fee to attend someone else's family reunion and then walk away never to be seen again, it makes no sense to get baptized, confirmed, or married in a church with which you don't expect to have an ongoing relationship. Asking a priest to do your wedding is not like hiring a caterer. Baptism is not a "get out of hell free card" with no other value or meaning. Confirmation is not simply a cute ceremony for your kid. Sacraments only have meaning in the context of the larger church family. The vows involved have life-long, even eternal, consequences for the one making them, and the community to which they belong. Sacraments are not private amenities provided by the church. The church is not a service provider, rather it is a group of people committed to each other, who mark life stages and celebrate spiritual milestones together.

There are others who believe the church is a social institution and the clergy and staff the hired-help to do ministry on their behalf. Such people show up Easter Sunday, see friends, enjoy the service, drop off a couple of dollars, and leave until Christmas. Or if they do think some sort of ministry should happen, they will call the church office and suggest that the clergy and staff “do something about that homeless problem,” while never considering that they themselves might lead that initiative. The reality is all baptized Christians, the whole church, are ministers. Clergy and staff are hired to assist lay parishioners in the fulfillment of their own ministries. And while the church certainly has an important social dimension, that is not its primary function.

There are others who believe church is a building, a location, a place. “I am going to church,” implies that your church is located at 705 Hale Street, and nowhere else. And while it is a blessing to have such a lovely space in which to worship, and helpful for our church community to be grounded in one location, the church is not the building itself. Instead, the church is the people, what is known in the Bible as the “Body of Christ.” Wherever two or three are gathered, there is the church.

One of my favorite descriptions of church is where it has been called the community which comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

What all these points have in common is that church is people in relationship, imperfect, but deep. In relationship with God and in relationship with each other.

If you look at the Book of Common Prayer, in the back, there is a section called the “Catechism.” In it the question is asked, “What is the Church?” and the answer is given, “the Church is the community of the New Covenant.” Note that relationship is implied in this definition. But what is this New Covenant?

In the Old Testament lesson today God tells the people, “The days are surely coming, ... when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel... I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” If you remember, three weeks ago we learned about the first covenant, the Old covenant that God made with Abraham. In it God promises to give Abraham land and many descendants, and they would be His people. In turn the people promise to worship only Yahweh. All males are circumcised as a sign of belonging to this covenant. But in our passage today, God foreshadows a new thing, a new covenant. A covenant which comes to define both Christians and church. A covenant which extends to include not just the descendants of Abraham, but all people. It was established during the Last Supper. We enter into this New covenant through baptism, and we affirm our participation in it week after week whenever we partake of the bread and wine in communion.

But covenant is a dry word, and church is messier, harder, and more glorious than it would imply. Church is a community of people with nothing in common other than a desire to love God and neighbor. The challenge is, we are human. We are imperfect. And we are all different. So we fail in our efforts to love. All the time. For instance, I know of parishioners who hear something they don’t like in the pulpit and decide, “I’m going to leave the church.” Or someone else who doesn’t like the way the hymns are played, or the way the Senior Warden

spoke to them, or believe the clergy don't visit enough, or don't like it when a service is Rite I, or don't like when a service is Rite II, or the rug color was changed in the parish hall, whatever, and conflict arises. And wherever there is conflict, love becomes challenging.

Just last week I was invited to meet with and perhaps endorse the writings of a clergy person from a very different Christian tradition. A far more evangelical Christianity. I suspected this man probably questions my right to be a priest because I am a woman. I started to get huffy and self-righteous, not wanting to bother meeting with him, until I slept on it and remembered that church is not about agreeing with my neighbors, it is about loving them. Church means rising above the differences we have, while still acknowledging that they exist, and looking instead to the larger picture of ourselves as a family, the Body of Christ. As the Apostle Paul said, "the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'; or again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" [1 Cor. 12]. We are connected and have need of each other, even if we can't see it in the moment.

Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran Pastor, once wrote about a meeting she had with her parish in which people answered the question, "What drew you to our church?" After people answered it, she gave her response, "I tell them that I love hearing all of that and that I, too, love being in a spiritual community where I don't have to add to or take away from my own story to be accepted. But... I wanted them to hear me: This community will disappoint them. It's a matter of when, not if. We will let them down or I'll say something stupid and hurt their feelings. I then invite them on this side of their inevitable disappointment to decide if they'll stick around after it happens. If they chose to leave when we don't meet their expectations, they won't get to see how

the grace of God can come in and fill the holes left by our community's failure, and that's just too beautiful and too real to miss."¹

Church at St. John's is when Monday Night suppers are prepared and served. Church is when communion is brought to a shut-in. Church is when the choir sings an anthem that transports us God. Church is when one of us can weep without judgement on the shoulder of another. Church is when something foolish is said at a Vestry meeting, but the person is loved and accepted anyway. Church is when the Lenten book group engages in discussion, something profound is shared by someone in the group, there is a collective ah-ha moment with us all, and a small portion of spiritual insight clicks into place. Church is not a service provider, or a group of perfect people, or mindless robots, or a building. Church is community of the new covenant founded in Christ, a relationship that we enter into with God and each other, in order to live more deeply. And when our own too human flaws get in the way, the Spirit steps in to sweep through the disconnect and ragged edges to make all things whole. Not perfect, but whole. And somehow, by the grace of God, we all lurch forward another step towards the Kingdom.

Amen.

¹ Nadia Botz-Weber. Pastrix. Pp 54-55.