

## SEEING THE CHURCH DIFFERENTLY

**Texts: Deut. 10:12-22; I Peter 2:4-10**

**8/30/09**

### **Introduction**

How do you recognize a church? I know you have a picture in your head that you can call up on a moment's notice. Let's play a game. Instead of me telling you what a church is let's start taking things away that might in your picture.

If I remove the paid clergy, the hymnbooks, the organ, and the choir, is it still a church? Suppose we eliminate youth programs, Wednesday night dinner and classes, and Sunday school, and the softball team. Are we still in business? What if we quit doing missions? Are we beyond the pale? Let's imagine we all pulled up here one Sunday morning and the building was gone – nothing left but a hole in the ground. Are we still Westminster Presbyterian Church?

It's a good game to play because it gets us out of our heads and into our gut. There are some things each of us so associate with the "church" we have hard time imagining one if they are missing.

One pastor I like has written that over many years most American Christians have come to recognize a church in terms of the "A, B, C's" – attendance, buildings, and cash. And if we were to protest that we all know better than that, he would quickly ask, "What do you spend most of your time measuring?"

His point is that for many of us a church is mainly a place we "come", so we measure what it takes to keep it going. The question is not "do those things matter?" – most of us would agree they do. But how much do they matter? And what, if anything, matters more?

Around A.D. 70 the Jewish people in Jerusalem experienced their 9/11. The Roman Empire, in order to teach them a lesson, leveled their Temple, the holy place of God, the focal point of their religion. And it made a huge impact on early Christians, many who still associated that temple with their faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. They couldn't point to the holy place any more.

The game we've played in our heads was no game for them. What's a church if it's not a place?

**1. Peter was trying to help his early church work that out as they felt the shock waves of a demolished temple. They were scattered in the world, worshipping an invisible messiah. Where was the church?**

He provides them an incredible image. Jesus, he says, is a *living stone*. And you, he says, are *living stones*, built upon his foundation. And what is being built is a “*spiritual house*” in which will be made sacrifices to God.

There’s still a Temple of the living God. It’s you, it’s me, and it all of us. Remember that silly little song many of us learned at camp all those years ago - *I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together...* Not so silly after all. The church is never as much about God’s place as it is about God’s people.

You are the real estate where the Holy One abides. And doesn’t that mean that what needs to be evaluated most closely isn’t the condition of our buildings but the character of our gathering?

We need to evaluate the condition of this Temple, the human one.

- What is the condition of our relationship with the people of God?..
- How are we preparing ourselves, our little stone in the temple, to be the dwelling place of God?..

Church won’t be over in an hour. It follows our fellowship right out the back door and into our week.

The problem with focusing on “A, B, C church” is that we can be successful at it without having to learn how to have a significant relationship with God or a redemptive, transforming Christian relationship with other people.

I’ll be the first to admit that this hard to keep straight. It’s so much easier to measure attendance, buildings and cash. Dick Halverson was the chaplain of the United States Senate for many years. He was a great Presbyterian and lover of Christ. Just before his death he said:

*In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ. They had a relationship with the Lord. It transformed them and their world.*

*Then the church moved to Greece where it became a philosophy. Later it moved to Rome where it became an institution. Next it moved to Europe where it became a culture. Finally it moved to the United States where it became a business. We’ve got far too many churches and so few fellowships.*

By all means let's invite people to *come* to church. But if it's "church" they find it will be because of who is here, not where they parked.

**2. A missional church is more God's people than it is God's place. And it is better understood as God's chosen more than God's volunteers.**

Peter tells the followers of Jesus Christ: *you are a chosen people... (vs. 9)*

Most of us probably didn't feel very chosen when we showed up (unless our parents dragged us.) We chose, didn't we? We liked the music, or some program we attended, or the preaching, or the mission trips, or the convenient location. We dared to hope God could help us with something on our list. So we decided to come here. We could have gone somewhere else.

But we were chosen, says Peter. And to understand what that means we have to look back to our story as we find in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy says that even though the world and all its people belong to God... *Yet the Lord set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendents, above all the nations as it is today (10:15)*

Before you went shopping for God, God went shopping for you. Out of boundless mercy God began wooing you for himself.

It's nice to be chosen, sometimes. When it was time to pick teams in gym class, you wanted to be chosen early (it was always a bummer to be picked last). We like be chosen for scholarships, honors, and special recognition. Surely being chosen by God comes with some perks and privileges.

And it does! To be chosen by God is to be given a faith in Christ that forgives our sins, places the hope of eternity in hearts, and allows us to experience in increasing ways the Love that is at the center of all creation.

But it's not all privilege. Moses warned his people not to get "stiff-necked"...resistant to God's prodding. The church was chosen for the sake of its mission. We have been made God's own people so that we can respond to God's calling on our lives.

Despite appearances this is not a volunteer army. God chooses people. Wake up to that and your life becomes a quest, not a choice. Allow your chosenness to seep into the center of your soul and you will laugh more and cry more than you thought possible. You will experience more comfort and more consternation than most people you know. Because you know your life isn't your life. And a church that knows it's on a quest is a joyful, restless place to be.

We are the chosen. And we dare not claim that privilege without owning the responsibility.

**3. We begin to see the church differently when we see it is more God's people than God's place; God's chosen more than God's volunteers. Missional churches know at least one more thing. God's people were chosen to be his Priests more than to live as his admirers.**

You see, conversion doesn't stop with faith in Jesus. We have to become converted to his church, the people of God. And then we have to be converted to its ministry in the world; the world for whom Christ died.

Peter says it this way:

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (vs. 9)*

We were ordained to the priesthood the day we responded to the voice of Christ in our lives. And the place of our ministry is the spiritual house God is constructing in the world, one living stone at a time.

Do you know what a priest does? A priest stands between people and God. A priest brings the needs of the people before God, and proclaims the mercy and justice of God before the people. A priest has one foot in the lives of people and one foot in the life of God. And Peter is telling us that's the role of the church in the world...and in our community.

We're tempted to do one or the other. It's easier to disappear into the world no different than anybody else, or gather in the holy huddle as God's admiration society – but our mission is different. We exist to bring Christ before the world and the world before Christ.

Are we training each other to be God's priests? That means we have just as much responsibility to serve the presence of God in the community as we do the sanctuary. We must learn not only to praise Christ in our gathering, but speak Christ in our scattering. Are we getting the picture that the Temple in which we all work isn't a building; it's the people of God being built one living stone at a time from the people of this community?

Missional churches see the church differently.

## **Conclusion**

*God's call is not entrusted to an elite, but is given to everyone. And it may be that the most ordinary are given the most crucial tasks. This was Tolkien's observation in his story *The Fellowship of the Ring*.*

*Again listen to how Tolkien describes the sense of calling that tugs at the small, ordinary hobbit named Frodo Baggins. He sits in a Council that has been called to decide who will take the powerfully corrupting ring back to its source to destroy it where the presence of evil is greatest. Who would undertake this quest?*

*"No one answered. The noon-bell rang. Still no one spoke. Frodo glanced at all the faces, but they were not turned to him. All the Council sat with downcast eyes, as if in deep thought. A great dread fell on him, as if he was awaiting the pronouncement of some doom that he had long foreseen and vainly hoped might after all never be spoken. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace ... filled all his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other will was using his small voice.*

*"'I will take the Ring,' he said, 'though I do not know the way.'"*

*We are the ordinary who have been given the call. We are the church, for the sake of the world. And though we don't always know the way, the good news is that by walking with Christ we will find it.*