

What is the Church: People, Prayer, Praise and Pulpit

Last in a Series

He took bread and gave thanks...in the same way he took the cup. Luke 22

They shared meals from house to house...Acts 2:46

...whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me. Matt. 25:40

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Prayer - Dear God, create in us a desire to understand, to follow, and to live out our faith in all we do with all that we are and with all that we have.

Message

What is the church and why does it exist?

Read Acts 2:46 They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals from house to house, every meal a celebration, as they praised God. (stop)

It was her sophomore year in high school. Her tight-knit group of friends were her world. Sports were her safe place. One night at a youth group gathering, one of the leaders shared their faith story. The leader told a story about his best friend; about how his best friend was always there for him, listened to him, never judged him, and always wanted the best for him. He shared about how his best friend never gave up on him, and how he would feel lost without his best friend. She left the youth group that night thinking she wanted a friend like that. Someone she could just be herself with. Someone she didn't have to pretend to be anything or anyone she wasn't. Someone who didn't define her by how she looked or her family's struggles or dysfunctional dynamics. A few months later, in the mountains of Colorado, at church camp, it all clicked and she met that friend. His name was Jesus.

That is the church and why it exists - coming alongside young people - all people, and offering them time, space, patience, affirmation, opportunity, comfort, support, guidance, and wisdom as they navigate the world around them. Telling our stories and listening to how their story is unfolding even if its different, especially if its different.

What is the church and why does it exist?

Read Luke 22:10- When it was time, he, Jesus, sat down, all the apostles with him and said, “You’ve no idea how much I have looked forward to eating this meal with you...” Taking the cup, he blessed it...taking the bread, he blessed it and broke it and gave it to them saying this is my body broken for you. (stop)

It happens every year and is one of my favorite events to be a part of here at Grace church. It is our Women’s Retreat. The very first one I went to, I went as a participant and it was held at Camp Allendale just down the road on 252. Since joining the staff in 2008, we have hosted one a year, sometimes two for the past 13 years. Out of all the speakers, themes, topics, lessons, books, locations, craft projects, songs, things gone well and things we never did again, the best part of every single retreat is the end. The tables are pushed aside and the chairs are formed into a circle and we share in communion. I sometimes sense by that point in the day, people are just going through the motions and circling the wagons for communion cause they know it's the last thing and then they are outta there! But then it happens...we start to share. We start to recap the day, lift up one another in support and prayer, talk about the highlights and things that surfaced through the Holy moments of the day. We come back to center and it is as if time slows down - we are suspended in the holy for just a moment and connected in a way like no

other time. It's beautiful. Moving. Inspiring. Raw. Messy. Breathtakingly mysterious and powerful.

That is the church and why it exists - feeding one another the kind of soul food that helps us carry on when we are tired and weary, or when we have had enough and just want it to be over and go home. Sharing life lessons and life struggles so that no one person carries it all. Remembering the presence of God with us, Emmanuel, Jesus in the passing of the cup and the breaking of the bread. Being together, building one another up, and making room for each other in the circle; making room at the table of God.

What is the church, and why does it exist?

Read Matthew 25:40 I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me...Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me - you did it to me. (stop)

A hot meal every week for anywhere between 30-115 people. A mini-parade for folks in lock down. Food drives for people. Food and supply drives for the animal shelter. Unloading and distributing food off the food trucks. Blood drives. After school tutoring. Booths at the fair. Support for local businesses and nonprofits. Christmas gifts for strangers. Thanksgiving baskets for our neighbors at Webb School. Meeting space for a dozen different groups who don't always clean up after themselves. Fundraisers and capital campaign projects. And that's the easy stuff. Walking in the pride parade for your son, daughter, or grand-daughter even if you don't understand or agree but you love them, or

walking for your friend who's family shut them out. Sitting in on a protest because you need to do something with all the emotions around a situation - you need to feel like you have a voice. Writing to your senators and government leaders even when those around you tell you it doesn't do any good. Participating in book studies that ask the hard questions and give space for honest reflection and answers. Being intentional and making friends with those who are different from you in order to show your kids the world is bigger than we sometimes let it be. Sponsoring refugee families even when your family doesn't agree or think it's a good idea. Not walking away from the church because things get tough and the future uncertain but staying the course when others have left.

That is the church and why it exists - connecting with the world and those in it in meaningful and significant ways; ways that matter. Engaging in the community and taking a stand in the midst of injustice, giving voice to the voiceless, and using our power to empower others.

That is the church and why it exists.

If we believe God is a God of love, forgiveness, compassion, hope, and goodness, then that is what we are to reflect. If we believe God is generous, faithful, and present, then that is what we and who we are to be. God works through presence and God needs a people to be present to and through and a people to intentionally create spaces for God to be experienced by others.

Those spaces (described by David Fitch in his book, *What is the Church and Why Does it Exist*) are represented by three types of circles.

SLIDE 1. Close circle - this circle represents the church; the circle of committed believers who gather (whatever that gathering looks like in a covid world) to submit their lives to Jesus in worship and community; practicing the practices of prayer, worship, meditation, scripture reading. It is a “Close,” *not* closed, but because it offers the closest of fellowship - closest of community and relationship for individuals because of their commitment to Jesus and his example. They live out and practice faith together.

SLIDE 2. Dotted circle - this circle recognizes God’s presence elsewhere in our lives and in the lives of others. We read in Acts 2 that the early church went “from house to house” and gathered in neighborhoods (Fitch 65 Acts 2:46) to eat together, to listen, share, and be present with one another in the coming and going of life’s rhythms. The gaps in the dotted circle symbolize windows, open doors, open pathways which allow people to see what God is doing. As we live out our faith and practice the practices, there are openings for others to see what Jesus is all about and how he makes a difference in our lives.

SLIDE 3. Open / half circle - It is here the church moves out into social spaces among the broken, the hurting, the oppressed, and the marginalized (“all the people” Acts 2:47 Fitch 66). This is when and where we go as Jesus went, not as a host but as a guest; we sit among people, listen to them, walk with them, see them, honor where they are on their journey and be present with them for no other reason than because God is present with us. This is where we show up and trust God is doing something powerful in the midst.

In churchy language, the first circle is the worship place, the second is the discipleship place, and the third is the place of mission (Fitch 67). All three serve the purpose of making space and recognizing God in our midst. They all are designed to bring us closer to God and Jesus and one another - They all are designed to equip us to grow in our faith and live it out every day - practicing the presence of God within each. .

We are to be a part of God's mission to restore all creation to God's presence. Despite our differences. Despite how vaccines and masks have become divisive. Despite politics. Despite different backgrounds and expectations. Despite prejudices. Despite the myriad of things that try to divide us. Despite it all, we are all the church. We are called to live our lives in a way that shows, invites, reveals, inspires, and challenges those who have eyes to see and ears to hear AND allow the presence of God in others to do the same for us, that everyone may come to recognize and hold to faith in Jesus Christ. That is the church and that is why it exists.

How will you be a part of its reality?

Amen