

What is the Church: Practice Makes Perfect
First in a Series

“They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together,
the common meal, and the prayers.” Acts 2:42 MSG

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Intro

What do you do when life is uncertain? When a situation feels out of control? Nothing makes sense? Or things just feel off, out of whack, not quite what they should be? You’ve been there haven’t you?

The doctor’s office calls and all you hear is, “we saw something.” The lab calls and your bloodwork is off. You have had test after test and nothing is giving you answers. Your son or daughter calls and says, “there’s been an accident.” You handle the first round of chemo fine but this time it wreaks havoc on your body. A faulty attic fan catches fire and destroys the house. You read in the paper or online that a childhood friend died of covid.

Or maybe it's nothing quite so tragic or drastic. Maybe it's getting used to a new routine, figuring out how to navigate the empty nest, or being a new parent. Maybe it’s starting over in a new place, new job, new school, or a new relationship. Maybe it’s lots of things all at once.

Whatever it is, you are surrounded by uncertainty.

It is in those moments you come to know what matters most. You go back to what you know, what or who you can count on. You declutter the inbox on your mind. You unpack the excess baggage of the heart. You let go of the little things - insignificant things, and focus on what is most important.

That is what I am going to ask you to do today church. Today and for the next few weeks, I want to invite you to go back to what you know - to what is important about following Jesus and what matters most about being church.

I don't know if you have noticed or not but the last 8 weeks at Grace church have been rather interesting. The loss of two critical staff positions. The spiritual renewal leave of one of your pastors. The absence of the other pastor due to a family tragedy. Not to mention just the regular juggling of schedules, planning of on-going ministries and partnerships, the meeting of various outside groups and organizations, preparing for the start of preschool, help-line or financial assistance requests, scheduled vacation for other staff, and the occasional call for a wedding or other celebration.

It was in the midst of all that, and while attending a conference, that I heard about a book called, *What is the Church and Why Does it Exist?* It is part of a series called, *The Jesus Way, Small Books of Radical Faith*. The series is a collection of various authors with various backgrounds and experiences, all dedicated using historical and biblical teachings to share the good news of Jesus for all people, of all times, in all places. What also

interested me about this book was that it was written by David Fitch, another one of my professors from Northern Theological Seminary.

Putting this all together then; all the uncertainty many people feel inside and outside the walls of the church, experiencing my own uncertainty when part of my world was turned upside down by the loss of one of my brothers, and knowing that whether we like it or not, admit it or not, want to accept it or not, agree with it or not, we live in challenging, tumultuous, uncertain times. And I am not just talking about the Covid19 virus or it's variant. People all over the map, from every age group, and within just about every category are asking tough questions and wanting real answers about their faith, the future, the state of the world, job security, financial stability, community and world issues, and the role of the church in all of it.

“When that happens,” Professor Fitch says, “when things get chaotic, and no longer seem to make sense, we must go back to the what and why. We must ask all over again: what are we doing here when we gather as the church and why are we doing it?” (12)

What is the church?

Why is it so important?

How do we live as the church in our own time and place?

Those are the questions we will explore and seek to answer over the next few weeks. Nothing to it, right? By God's grace and with the Holy Spirit as our guide, may we have the courage to try.

Prayer

Dear Lord, gather our thoughts and minds in this moment and may your Spirit fall upon us all in a way that makes sense to us, that reveals to us your message of love and grace, and that helps us understand more clearly what it means to follow you and be your church here and now.

Message

What an amazing moment it must have been, that moment when God birthed the church! Remember...the story is retold for us in the book of Acts.

As the story goes...large numbers were gathered in Jerusalem for one of the five significant feasts held throughout the year...thousands of people from all over the known world at the time; most were devout Jewish believers, some were believers in other pagan gods, some were searching for faith. All different languages. Customs. Expectations. Drawn together for one celebration.

Then, like the sound of rolling thunder or a distant wave gathering speed, or the sound of a train gaining momentum on the tracks, Whoosh!!! God's Spirit comes in and before the people knew it, the apostles - these outsiders called by Jesus to speak his truth and good news to all, were suddenly talking and the people could understand them in their own language.

I recently described it in this way - State Fair example!

It is just after that moment that we pick up today's reading. Peter ceases the opportunity to interpret what just happened. He stands before the crowd and proclaims the life and teaching of Jesus and God's purpose to redeem all people and restore the kingdom of God on earth. He describes the impact of Jesus on his own life and how his faith would not be shaken. He lays it all out for all those with ears to hear - the sermon of his life!

With the crowd in the palm of his hand and in the center of the Holy Spirit, he gave the greatest altar call in history.

Read Text - Acts 2:42-47

That dear friends is a good day in the pulpit - a good day in the kingdom!

And there was laid the foundation of the early church. With a handful of fisherman turned apostles, the band of followers who stuck it out with them, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and a few thousand of their closest friends. All founded on what? The divine plan of God, the love and example of Jesus, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And what did the early church do? This newly formed band of believers - a new team Jesus? What makes any good team? Practice. Where do they start? Fundamentals! They practiced being church. They practiced living out the truths taught by Jesus' example. They practiced living in harmony, pooling their resources, and being a community. It was a faith lived out (not just talked about, read about, or preached about) -

lived out; practiced alongside others doing the same - trying to live a Jesus centered life.

These were people from all over the known world. They weren't cookie cutter believers. They weren't like minded individuals gathering for a cause. They weren't all from the same side of the tracks. They didn't all come from the same socio-economic background, have the same educational level, or access to the same training, opportunities, or lifestyle.

In fact, about the only thing they did have in common was their faith and belief in Jesus - and that was enough. They were committed to practicing a living faith that others would see what love, justice, peace, compassion and a kingdom community looked like and that it was possible.

I am sure it wasn't easy. I am confident it wasn't always pretty. I am certain different people at different times wanted to quit and walk away. (otherwise Paul wouldn't have had so much to write about!) But church, even in the chaos and uncertainty, they stayed the course because Jesus was their center, and when they got off course, they trusted God and each other to find a wa.

Theologian Ephraim Radner proposed that we should not see unity as an ideal of perfect harmony in all relations that churches reach, but instead as an understanding that the church by nature is always in process of sorting out its disagreements; this sorting is a part of a way of life and in fact it is our conflicts and the way we practice reconciliation in the midst of

them that gives witness to our unity in Christ. He call this process a “brutal unity.” (19).

Church might look different now but it’s definition and purpose is the same - church is a community of practices - those activities and ways of living that reflect the life of Jesus; church is the joining of people together in their commitment to and faith in Jesus as Lord (15).

Practice makes perfect. Just ask any olympic athlete returning home from Japan. Practice makes perfect. Whether you are an elite athlete, pro ball player, professional dancer, esteemed chef, or renowned author, speaker, and preacher. Practice makes perfect. The same applies to doing and being church. And what we practice is what we perfect.

Worship. Prayer. Study. Spiritual Formation.

Building bridges with all people.

Listening. Learning.

Mending brokenness.

Reaching understanding.

Offering forgiveness. Accepting forgiveness.

Caring together. Growing together.

Has any one of us mastered that list? Then we, as a church, continue to practice - continue to trust one another - and continue to trust the foundation all of it must be built on, Jesus. And I, like Peter, stand before you, proclaiming the good news that God is in the business of love

and restoration, that Jesus showed us the way, and that the Holy Spirit has filled us with all we need to make it happen. AMEN