

“The Church is The Embodiment of Easter”

Next Sunday, June 4, the liturgical color will change from white to red. This will signal the end of the Easter Season and the beginning of the Season of Pentecost. Between Easter and Pentecost, we have recounted various resurrection stories ... appearances by Jesus Christ to his faithful. Now the time has come for Jesus to return to the Father. The resurrected Christ, visible to those who would see, no longer will be seen. The First Easter remains in the eyes and ears of Jesus' followers, and telling the Easter Story relies on their willingness to bear witness.

However, there is a major concern. As first hand witnesses die, how will the Easter Story be preserved for future generations? A vessel ... a vehicle is needed to embody the Easter Event. And so, for better or for worse, the Church becomes the primary appearance in the world of the Risen Christ. The Church is the institutional embodiment of Easter, and even though at times corrupted ... inept ... sinful ... hypocritical (indeed, humanly flawed!) ... the Church is the means of grace for us and the whole world.

The Book of Acts, written by Luke, is a historical account of the development of the First Church. Our lesson today from chapter one is Peter telling the story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus while emphasizing Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Also Luke gives an account of Judas' replacement and how that election took place. Matthias is elected by drawing lots, which in the Old Testament, was considered a holy act. This gives Luke a chance to define who is an "apostle." An apostle is someone who had been with Jesus from the "baptism of John until the day (Jesus) was taken up." For Luke, apostles are eyewitnesses who can give an accurate account of Jesus. It is strange, after all the excitement of Easter, to begin the Book of Acts with this mundane account of the election of Matthias to take the place of the betrayer, Judas.

Instead of exalted talk about the resurrection and all the wonderful things going on in the faith community, Luke chooses to open with honest, sober talk about the betrayal of Jesus, and the business-like selection of Matthias. One author sees this as a wise way to follow the joy of Easter, telling of the "nitty-gritty details of church organization" and the "honest admission of the reality of betrayal from within the inner circle of the Jesus movement." Indeed, Easter must be institutionalized ... embodied in the church, and at the same time, if one is looking for the betrayers of Jesus ... one must begin with the church!

Like it or not, seven Sundays after Easter, we must pause for some honest reflection about the need to embody the gospel within necessary institutional structures. The polity, the organization, and the institution of the church are necessary ways of preserving, expanding, and passing on the Easter faith. Leadership is utterly necessary within the church, because leadership is the sign of the continuing grace of a living Lord. Of course God would be easier to obey if God never took human, specific, fleshly form. The god of Sunday morning TV ... the god of vague thoughts while walking in the woods ... is much less demanding ... much less intruding than the God who meets us on the faces of our adopted brothers and sisters in the church. Jesus Christ did not come to us as some noble, abstract idea ... some mushy inner feeling. Jesus Christ came to us in the flesh, as a Jew from Nazareth.

Furthermore, Jesus did not work alone ... momentarily touching people' hearts and letting it go at that. No! Jesus from the start ... called real flesh and blood people (like you and me) ... called us to follow ... to visibly ... daily ... take up our cross and follow. That's the church. It's real. It's earthly. Of course, the church sets our minds on eternal, heavenly things. But we do not live in heaven ... yet! We live here ... 19901 White Ground Road ... among real people, who sometimes are lovable and sometimes exasperating ... sometimes faithful and sometimes foolish. But this is exactly where God meets us in the Risen Christ. When I think about the election of Matthias and all that church business right after Easter, I believe it was a thoroughly Easter act by which the resurrection was given bodily form ... extended ... preserved in the life of the church ... offered to future generations ... made real and present in the lives of believers with names like Mary, Martha, Peter, and Matthias.

The truth be told, we don't live on Cloud Nine. We don't make our homes in some ethereal Never-Never Land of divine bliss. We live right here ... among real people who have bills to pay ... children to raise ... parents to care for, and questions to be answered. And the beautiful thing is, in Jesus Christ and his church, God meets us here ... gives us thoroughly human, visible proof of His continual care for us. The Risen Christ told his followers that he would not leave them alone when he returned to the Father; that he would give them ongoing guidance, comfort, and presence. What Jesus gave them was a lasting gift. Jesus gave them the Church.

In fact, Jesus gave us each other! It matters not whether you have been here all your life, or this is your first Sunday. The Church is for the moment people gathered in Jesus' name to worship God, to obey his commandment to love by loving one another, and to daily keep the faith. The great theologian, Karl Barth says that to rise on Sunday and affirm, "I believe in the Holy catholic

church,” is to believe that *at this place, in this assembly, the work of the Holy Spirit takes place. By that is not intended a deification of the creature; the Church is not the object of faith, we do not believe in the Church; but we do believe that in this congregation the work of the Holy Spirit becomes an event.*

During his Tenth Anniversary Show, Garrison Keillor told a story about an experience during his teenage years. Walking down the sidewalk one day, he saw this unbelievably beautiful woman coming toward him ... a stunningly, gorgeous woman. What could he do? He spied a large, white Cadillac parked next to the sidewalk. Strolling over to the Cadillac, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a dime, put it in the parking meter, and leaned confidently against the Cadillac, smiling at the approaching woman. To his delight, she returned his smile. She moved toward him, spoke to him, saying “Thank you,” as she got into the Cadillac and drove off!

This is somewhat a modern day parable. The church is not our Cadillac. As pastor, leaders, teachers, and all others, we are stewards of the mysteries of God, but we are not owners. It is fine for us to make our contribution, to lean against the church in order to look good, but ultimately this Cadillac is God’s and God has entrusted it to each of us, His people ... His children. No one owns this church. This church is God’s. No one is more special. We are all special to God. This is not a great church ... for there are no great churches. There are only *faithful* churches. And what makes a faithful church? ---faithful people! So much of how society measures the success of a church is totally irrelevant: size, budget, architecture, programs, etc. The measure of a church is its people and how much they obey their call to be faithful disciples ... how much they use their gifts for the building up of the Body of Christ in its witness among itself and to the world.

I believe the Christian Church, in many ways, has failed in its witness to this nation. The disintegration of the family, the lack of community, the moral and ethical decay of people lay at the doorstep of Christ’s Church. We have permitted ourselves to be more influenced by the American culture than we have by our faith. We have allowed the church and its programs to be ends in themselves. We have allowed denominational headquarters to define the agendas and the issues. We have allowed charlatans and heretics to crowd the air waves. We have lost influence and power to the point that, who listens when the church speaks? For the most part, the church in the life of this nation seems ceremonial. Don’t get me wrong. I believe the Christian Church has the power to do anything God wants. But that power ... that resource goes largely untapped and is greatly dissipated, because the today’s Church moves in a thousand directions.

Jim Wallis in his book, “Call to Conversion” writes what I think is a clue to how Christ’s Body can re-focus itself. He says, “The greatest need in our time is not simply for ‘kerygma,’ the preaching of the gospel; nor for ‘diakonia,’ service on behalf of justice; nor for “charisma,” the experience of the Spirit’s gifts; nor even for ‘propheteia,’ the challenging of the king. The greatest need for our time is ‘koinonia,’ the call simply to be the Church ... to love one another and to offer our lives for the sake of the world.

Further Wallis says, “The creation of living, breathing, loving communities of faith at the local church level is the foundation of all the other answers. The community of faith embodies a whole new order, offers a visible and concrete alternative, and issues a basic challenge to the world as it is. The church must be called to *be* the church, to rebuild the kind of community that gives substance to the claims of faith.”

The first Christians discovered that they were the church, having been created as a community by the impact of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by their receipt of the Holy Spirit. They were the ongoing, visible Risen Christ. We have inherited their responsibility; to give visible witness of the Easter Event, to literally embody Easter, its spirit, its reality, its eternal message.

Here at 19901 White Ground Road is the embodiment of Easter. After 12 noon, wherever we go today and the rest of the week, the church is there with us because we are the church. We are to mirror the life style of Jesus in the way we relate to others, because we believe our life is not our own ... it is God’s. What would God have us do? --- is the question we must keep before us. We will know the answer when we see it. Trust is part of faith. Therefore, as a people of faith, we need to work to build a stronger faith community. We each have a part to play and gifts to give ... the greatest gifts being our faith and our love. As we move into the Season of Pentecost, let us be a church that strives not to be great, but a church that lives to be faithful ... not a church rich in things but a church wealthy in spirit ... not a church that is self-absorbed but a church that is self-professing ... not a church that is simply brick and mortar ... but a church that is flesh and blood. Amen.