

September 19, 2021

“A Force for God”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Selected verses from Jesus

Rev. Rebecca Mincieli, 508-548-3050

I mentioned it during announcements, but I was so happy to see Mark Karsner and Bobye Anderson get our English as Second Language Program started again. And I am grateful to the fifteen volunteers willing to tutor our foreign brothers and sisters, and help them learn English. Most of them are working hard at jobs many Americans don't want so that they can better themselves. And learning English is not easy. It's widely considered that English is one of the hardest languages to learn. Why? Well, for one thing sometimes English doesn't make sense – there's no ham in hamburger, and no pine or apple in pineapple. To 'overlook' and 'oversee' something is totally different, and yet look and see are the same. And there's I before E except after C, until you have to spell science or weird or seize. And then some words have multiple meanings, like “fine.” Which can mean very high quality, or payment for a violation. The word “row” can mean an argument, or something in a straight line, or the action required to move a boat forward. And the word fair can mean being just, or having a light complexion, or a Christmas event here at the church. Unless of course you change the spelling and then fare means money for public transportation, a food group – like picnic fare, or as a verb – how did you fare at the interview? See what I mean! So that being the case, I want to talk about another word that seems to have many meanings. The word “church.” Just think in your own mind a minute. How would you define “church?”

Perhaps, for you, church is where you go to worship – it's what you do on Sunday morning, it's a refuge from the outside world, it's a community of believers, it's an institution that proclaims God in the world. Unfortunately however, that's not how many people in our society would define church. Many perceive the church to be hypocritical, judgmental, old fashioned, boring, not relevant to the modern day world. And why is this? Well, I think, in part, it's because the “church” has an identity crisis. Somewhere along the way we've lost, or become confused, about our identity as the Body of Christ - what it is we should really be doing. And so today, I want to talk about this - what is the purpose of the church?

Now to help us answer that question, let's go back to the beginning. In our English Bibles, we find the word “church.” But the original Greek translation uses the word *ekklesia*. Now *ekklesia* was not a religious term. It simply meant “a called out gathering or assembly for a purpose.” Soldiers were called out to gather for military purposes. Citizens were called out to gather for civic purposes. *Ekklesia* was

not a place – it was group of people united by, and meeting for, a specific purpose. So in the early days of Christianity, these *ekklesias*, these gatherings, were centered, not on a place, but on a person – Jesus Christ. And as more and more people learned about Jesus, new *ekklesias* sprung up and spread throughout the known world. So the original *Ekklesia* was actually a movement and its purpose was to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. *Ekklesia* was a force for God in the world.

That changed when Roman Emperor, Constantine became a Christian in 312 AD, and legalized Christianity. As Pastor Andy Stanley writes, “Before Constantine’s rise to power, Christian worship was relatively informal. Believers met in homes, enjoying what they called “love feasts,” the ancient equivalent of a potluck meal. After the meal, they sang hymns, read Scripture, discussed theology and shared communion. After Constantine’s conversion, Christian worship began to incorporate elements of imperial protocol, including incense, ornate clothing, processions, choirs and pageantry. Within a decade, the *ekklesia* ceased to be a movement. It was no longer an expanding group of people sharing a unique identity and purpose. It had become a location. The Romans called these gathering places a “basilica” the Latin word used to denote a public building. Later, the German word “*kirche*” meaning “house of the lord” came to be known as a ritual gathering location. And that’s the name “*kirche*,” or “church,” that we use now.¹ So there was a shift from the *ekklesia* focused on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, to the church – a place for people to come.

So what does that mean for us here and now? What is the identity of the “church” in the 21st century? Are we just a building where people come? A cozy clique of Christ? Or, can we, in fact, be a force for God in this world by spreading the good news of Jesus Christ out beyond our walls? Because, isn’t that really what the church is called to do? To carry on the mission and ministry of Jesus? That mission we heard him articulate today: “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. I’ve come to proclaim good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. I came to seek and to save the lost.” Jesus is telling us that his purpose in coming was to minister to those who were spiritually needy – the lost, the hurting, those who were blind to the promises and blessings of God. And as his modern day followers, shouldn’t that be our purpose as well – to reach out to those who don’t know him. Who don’t know the love, the peace, the joy, the power that he can bring them in their lives. You know, Jesus could have stayed in the synagogue, preaching. He could have taught rabbinical school. But instead he went out. Out to the lakeshore, to the hillside, to the villages.

¹ Andy Stanley, “Deep and Wide” pg. 61-62

So I want to give you something to think about. Because if we are to carry on Christ's mission in the world, then we need to do the same. You see, we need to think of church, as being not only, not even primarily, for us, but the church as being for those who do not know God. Certainly you and I need the church – this gathering, to worship together, to learn and grow, to fellowship, to keep our faith alive and strong. But, if we are going to be a force for God in this world, we need to intentionally take our faith out into the mission field of the world around us. And engage people who do not know Christ, who have a spiritual void, a spiritual need, in their lives. We must have a heart for the 'nones' - the unchurched, the seeker, the 'spiritual, but not religious', the poor, the oppressed, the lost. As Rev. Eugene Bay says, "The 'ministry of Jesus' is the unfinished business, the on-going work, the high and holy vocation of the church. What a responsibility! What a privilege!"² What a privilege!

And yet the church seems to be failing in this? Why? That's because we cannot be a force for God in this world, unless we make God a force in our own lives. Unless our love for God, and our desire to be like Christ guides our words and our behavior. So that we interact with all people around us with empathy, compassion, grace, selflessness, love. And that is hard for us to do, especially when we are confronted daily with news like Gabby Petito being missing, a restaurant hostess being beaten up by a crowd in New York City because of vaccination requirements, the on-going conflicts in Washington, all the contentiousness and incivility that exists out there. It's easy to let the events of this world affect our thinking, our actions. That's why we must have what author William Diehl calls "The Monday Connection." Living out on Monday and the rest of the week what we say we believe on Sunday. He writes, "In today's world, Sunday Christians are irrelevant. The sermons, hymns, prayers and creeds of Sunday morning have no impact upon the outside world unless they shape the lives of Christians during the rest of the week. The false idols and deceptive values of society remain unchallenged unless 'Sunday Christians' act and witness to their faith in everyday life, in a relevant manner.' And that's true – the only way we will live out our true identity as the Body of Christ, and change people's perception of the church, is when we ourselves act more like Christ, every day. If the Christian church is to make any difference, it will only be because we "make the Monday connection."

Yes, if we, the John Wesley United Methodist Church, is to be a force for God in this world, then we must have a desire to reach those who do not know Jesus Christ and share with them how he can make positive a difference in their lives. And we can only do that if we make the 'Monday connection.'

² Rev. Eugene Bay, "A Sower Went Out" pg. 188

I want to end with a story told by Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard. He'd been out on the town in Copenhagen. He noticed a girl with a beggar's basket, leading three musicians down the street, begging. The musicians were blind. And they were trained, classically trained. They were playing Mozart and Beethoven, and it was just beautiful music. Around them gathered a little crowd of street people who didn't have any money. And down the street, clattering in their chariots, went those who had money, going to the evening's entertainment. After observing this, Kierkegaard wrote, "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are willing but cannot and those who are able, but will not."

I think Kierkegaard was wrong. There are three kinds of people: Those who are willing but cannot, those who are able, but will not, and then there's you.... there's you.³ Amen.

³ Fred Craddock - The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock pg. 292