

Sermon 8-17-25

Paul Purdue preaching

The Franklin County Ministerial Alliance did not meet during the summer, so my Senior Pastor sent me to represent our church at the August meeting. I was fresh out of seminary, in my first appointment, and my second month at the church. After the preachers finished their second, third or fourth trip to the breakfast bar, we learned how to serve as a volunteer chaplain at the local hospital and then moved on to the main agenda: The March for Jesus. The March for Jesus would begin with a worship service at the High School football stadium after which participants would march to the town square and surround the courthouse with songs and prayers. As a church on the square, First Methodist mattered because we had a good portable sound system, along with parking and restroom facilities. As the Alliance members debated details, I raised my hand and asked *“What is the purpose of the March for Jesus?”* My question was the sort of straightforward question that would not have raised an eyebrow in the seminary cafeteria, but in the backroom of that Shoneys it sparked a wildfire.

A grey haired pastor in a cream colored suit demanded *“What do you mean, what is the purpose of the March for Jesus?”* I answered, *“Well is the March for Jesus a statement of Christian unity or an attempt at evangelism?”* My clarifying question did nothing to cool the fires or promote Christian unity. A non-demonitional church planter fleeing California waved a judgy finger at me and declared *“when I was praying this morning, the Holy Spirit told me that the Dark One would send a Spirit of Disruption into our meeting today!”* Foolishly, I took pride in their rebuke and fired back, *“they said worse things about my fair Lord!”* Looking back, I feel confident that my pride at being accused of being in league with the devil was not what Jesus had in mind when he said *“Happy are you when people insult you and harass you and speak all kinds of bad and false things about you, all because of me. Be full of joy and be glad...”* (Matthew 5:12) I jabbed Bible verses like a former evangelical prizefighter, with no thought of speaking the truth in love or trying to build anyone up. As the theological wildfire filled the room, one dear saint pleaded *“let’s just remember Jesus, because we all agree about Jesus”*. Another fresh from seminary, first time pastor, George, who had won the preaching award at Yale a few months before, pointed out, *“Friends, we may disagree about Jesus as much as any topic.”* All decorum fell away. We ended without a closing prayer. My Senior Pastor accompanied me to the next meeting and tried to smooth things over, but the March for Jesus, whatever its purpose, did not occur that year.

Being in Christian community can be challenging. It sometimes feels like it is easier to be a Christian by yourself. The problem is Jesus calls us into community. Jesus went to synagogue, called disciples and invites us into a community of love and justice Jesus called the Kingdom of God. Jesus retreated for private prayer, many times and once for 40 days, but Jesus’ ministry always involved community. I am pretty sure we can’t be Christ-like without being part of the community.

Why does the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament call us into community? What is the purpose of the church? Why do we need to get up on a Sunday morning, get dressed, come to Sunday school and stay for church? Why not practise our faith alone, or with a few like-minded individuals?

If we study, pray and practice our faith, alone beside a mountain stream, then there are no neighbors to love as ourselves, no people to forgive so that we can know forgiveness, no peace to make so that we can live as children of God. If we only break bread with like-minded friends, if we shake the dust off and move away from anyone we disagree with, then we will never need to do the heavier spiritual lifting of loving (offering redemptive goodwill) our enemies or try to turn a theological cheek when challenged.

Looking at Matthew 5, John Wesley asked how can we be salt preserving the world and light shining hope to the world, if we practice our faith alone? Immediately after the Beatitudes Jesus challenges us to live as a city on a hill, letting the light of our good works shine so that others can see what we are doing and glorify God. Wesley asserted that "*Christianity is a social religion (living and conversing with other people) and that to turn Christianity into a solitary religion is to destroy it, not just diminish it, but to destroy it.*" Wesley argued that Christian practices like meekness, patience, mercy, peacemaking, justice, and even simply doing good requires the presence of other people. (Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount-Discourse 4) If "*all the prophets and the law can be summed up in loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves*"- then Jesus faith is not some set of beliefs or an ethereal spiritual construct but an actual, physical, everyday, incarnational action-driven love- as tangible and personal as the cross. (Matthew 22)

Why do we rehearse our faith in church? We come together in worship, prayer, conversation and song each week because Christianity only emerges inside community. God comes into our midst as we search the Scriptures together, Jesus appears as we wash each other's feet, the Spirit fills us as we blend our voices, Wisdom comes near as we hold each other's insights, questions and stories. Christ appears as we break bread, offer a drink to the thirsty, clothe the ragged, welcome strangers, forgive, show mercy, make peace, weep with the hurting, and rejoice with one another. Like the first disciples we process our spiritual journeys together.

Our passages offer two images of the kind of community the church can and should strive to be.

We often read the Hebrews passage on All Saints Sunday remembering the saints who have guided us from Abraham to Mary, and the saints who worshiped with us not that long ago. We remember those who once held us and continue to uphold us. We give thanks for the partners in ministry who teach and walk with us shining the light of Christ from the nursery to our Graham Inquirers class as we share this journey of faith, hope and love. In our grateful remembering, we can at times forget the Hebrews passage calls us to get moving! Hear a version of these words again:

So then let's run the race that is laid out in front of us, since we have such a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us. Let's throw off any extra baggage, get rid of the sin that trips us up, and fix our eyes on Jesus, faith's pioneer and perfecter. Christ endured the cross, ignoring the shame, for the sake of the joy that was laid out in front of him, and sat down at the right side of God's throne. Think about Jesus who endured such opposition so that you won't be discouraged and you won't give up.

Imagine Jesus, Moses, and Magdalene are surrounding us with love. Think of John Wesley, Mother Teresa and Dr King who share our prayers. See, Heather, Hunter and Henriatta who cheer us on as we run life's race. Shine your light. Inspire others. Do the hard stuff. Be in community.

Our Ephesians passage puts it something like this: *God's purpose for giving any of us any spiritual gift is to equip us for the work of serving in and building up the body of Christ. Build each other up. Keep building until everyone experiences the unity of faith and knowledge of God's Love. God longs for us to become spiritually mature—to grow up into Christ-likeness. Speak the truth with love. Make it your work to grow in every way into Christ (who is not only our model but is present with us empowering us). We are joined and held together into Christ's church. We are like supporting ligament in Christ's body. God is manifesting God's very presence through us right here on the corner of 21st and Acklen, so build each other up with love, each one of us needs to do our part.* (adapted)

Doctor King asserted *"The church is the one place where a doctor ought to forget that they are a doctor.... The church is the one place where the lawyer ought to forget that they are a lawyer. And any church that violates the 'whosoever will, let them come' doctrine is a dead, cold church, and nothing but a little social club with a thin veneer of religiosity. When the church is true to its nature... It is the one place where everybody has the same standing before our savior. And a recognition grows out of this shared standing- that all people are siblings because we are all children of God."* (adapted from The Drum Major Instinct)

Why do we gather? What is our purpose? Our church work, our shared ministry, our common life is about incarnational love more than theological judgments. So let us stop competing, stop trying to win, stop judging and instead do something more radical. Let us strive to build each other up in love, to season our words with grace, to do our part to strengthen each other, to live into our deep connectedness as Christ's manifestation on earth. Let Love become the measure of our words, speaking the truth with Love editing our speech. Let us cheer each other on, build each other up, and speak our truth with deep love. Amen.