

## WHEN A CHURCH IS A CHURCH

Preached by Douglas Norris in the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto  
July 24, 1983 Colossians 2:1-15

There have certainly been periods in history when the church has not been a church. Of course, there are cyclical periods - ups and downs - when the church moves between strength and weakness, growth and shrinkage, vitality and inertia, advance and retreat. As in a person's life, you are not always "on top". There are cycles.

But, there have been times in history when the church has not been a church. A strong case can be made for the observation that if either Judaism or Christianity had been viable and strong in 8th century Arabia, a man by the name of Mohammed might never have been compelled to start the religion called Muslim or Islam. He was searching and if the church had been the church, there might not have been a vacuum for Islam to fill.

We are studying the letter to the Colossians in this series of sermons. Last Sunday I preached of God's major task: redemption. I applied it to us as individuals. We are redeemed, we are good enough, not of our own doing, but because of God's love for us. Today let us apply the task of redemption to the church. The church is the body of Christ, called to be Christ and to do Christ's work in our world today.

WHEN A CHURCH IS A CHURCH, IT IS DOING THE WORK OF REDEMPTION. Colossians 1:20: "And through Christ, to reconcile to himself all things." All things, all people, all life are loved by God. God is working in this world to reconcile creation with himself and for the purpose to which the world and humanity were created, the purpose revealed in and through Jesus Christ.

There is a world out there to redeem. When a church is a church, it is serious about preaching, teaching, living, embodying, influencing in Christ's name and for Christ's sake. When a church is a church, it is loyal to God, committed to God's ideals and purpose as revealed in Jesus Christ, and concerned about people who are hurting.

There is a world out there where people hurt: youths ruining their bodies and minds with drugs, people crippled by alcoholism, marriages failing, families destroying one another, sexual expressions in and through which people are dehumanized, a world where people are hungry. There are children who try to sleep at night without ever knowing what it is to be full. Their stomachs are swollen, their bodies crying for nutrition. When a church is a church, it is concerned. It cares about people and responds to human need with a message of God's love and a ministry of compassion.

An artist was once commissioned to paint a dying church by a man who had in mind a church of his childhood; a small wooden structure in a declining rural community; probably with weeds in the yard, paint-starved sliding, and an absence of people. But the artist painted a large church, a cathedral. It may have resembled our building! It had stained glass windows, well-fed prosperous looking ministers, organ pipes. The patio was swept, the windows were washed, people stood about the doors. It looked successful.

Viewers were intrigued with the title, "a Dying Church." The artist said, "You have to look closely." Almost with the need of a magnifying glass, they could see a table just inside the church door with an offering plate over which a sign read "Offering for Missions." Extending from the top of the sign to the outside of the plate, covering the entire plate, was a cobweb. No one had touched that plate in a long time. That, said the artist, is a dying church. When a church is more con-

cerned with its buildings or its own congregation than with the world out there, it may be a nice club or fellowship, but it is not a church of Jesus Christ which has been called solely for the purpose of "going into the world, preaching the gospel, teaching the nations."

There is a world out there where people are oppressed, mistreated, victimized because of their economic status, color, religion or sex. When a church is a church, it stands alongside the mistreated as did Jesus. It aligns itself with the poor as did Jesus.

There is a world out there with a strong suicidal drive. Can you believe a 180 billion dollar military budget? I can't even count the zeroes much less understand what it means. Are we crazy? If you could stand on another planet and look at this one called "earth," wouldn't you conclude that we are intent on destroying ourselves? Nations build arsenals, make weapons, fill silos with missiles that can never be used. What a crazy world! We put money into non-productive means while people live in cars, stand in food lines, exploit churches and welfare, and schools go down the tubes. We put our money, energy and resources into playing games, suicidal games, with the life of the very planet upon which we live. There is world out there that is crazy!

When a church is a church, it speaks for sanity. It is loyal to God, committed to God's ideals, and concerned about people. It takes unpopular stands because we are commissioned to be about the work of redemption; saving, not destroying.

When a church is a church, it is not very popular. As Jesus was persecuted, as Jesus was hung upon the cross which becomes our symbol, so a church when it is a church can expect to be persecuted, can expect to be misunderstood and nailed to a cross. When a church is a church, the enemies and attackers come out of the woodwork.

But, Jesus said, "Blessed are you, happy are you, when you are persecuted for righteousness' sake." And I must admit, I get a certain pleasure in being a United Methodist when we are attacked by the Reader's Digest, 60 Minutes and Jerry Falwell! We must be doing something right to be criticized and attacked by Jerry Falwell! He and his kind call us Commies, or communist sympathizers, peaceniks, nukeniks, in part because we feed hungry people regardless of their politics. In Manteca we had the children and youth collect for UNICEF every Halloween. Each year we could expect a letter-to-the-editor in the local paper from a lady in Ripon who would dutifully instruct the community that UNICEF is a communist organization and, implying, that the church is a communist-front. UNICEF responds to children emergencies even in Communist countries. Evidently we are supposed to let communist children die. Can you see the picture? A doctor sees a child, boiling with fever, and with an antibiotic in his hand, first leans down and asks the child, "Now are you or any member of your family a member of the Communist part or have communist leanings?" Human need is the issue.

When a church is a church, responding to human need, taking stands on unpopular issues, seeking to be faithful to God and about the business of redeeming, saving, this universe and its inhabitants; the church will be misunderstood, misrepresented, and attacked. We will lose some, but we will win some. Jesus did not promise success, he promised the cross. Jesus did not ask us to be successful, he asked us to be faithful.

In order to be the church and serious about redemption, we need to be clear about what it takes internally. In our Colossian passage for today, 2:1-15, Paul identifies some marks, some characteristics of a true church. These characteristics

not only identify a church from some other organization, not only help us assess when a church is a church; but these characteristics are essential for us to survive as a church. Internally-that is in our fellowship, in our relationship with one another - the following three characteristics are essential.

First, Paul says, when a church is a church, we are "knit together in love," 2:2. The true church is distinguished by love for God and love for one another. In order to survive in this world today, and in order to survive as a church serious about redeeming this world, we must be sustained and encouraged by people who love one another. I can't make it alone, and neither can you. We can only make it when we truly care about one another. Perhaps that is a reason why Family Camps, and similar experiences, are so vital these days. In a camp setting, love, concern and encouragement are so evident. The story is told of a young boy who would walk miles across windy, cold Chicago to get to Dwight L. Moody's church. Someone once asked him, "Why do you walk way over there? You pass many churches on the way; why don't you go to one of them?" The boy replied simply, yet profoundly, "They love a kid over there." You know what he means. You know what kind of a church, what kind of a fellowship he is describing. When a church is a church, they love kids, and they love one another, and they love Jesus.

Secondly, Paul writes, when a church is a church, it is strong and firm, characterized by "good order and firmness of your faith (2:5), rooted and built up in him and established in the faith (2:7)". The Good News translation of these two verses reads, "resolute firmness with which you stand together in your faith in Christ. Keep your roots deep in Christ, build your lives on him, and become stronger in your faith." The Jerusalem Translation writes verse 7 with a twist, "You must be rooted in him, and build on him, and held firm by the faith." Here the faith we have in Christ holds us firm. We do not make ourselves firm in the faith, God hold us firm through our faith. This characteristic is vital in our tumultuous world. Discipline, training, firmness, immovability, strong in the faith are all needed desperately. We need to study together, grow together, get the Bible into our heads, into our hearts, and into our fellowship, so that it is second nature to us. Study the faith and apply it to the world, resolute and firm, in our commitment to Christ, upheld by our love and support for one another.

Thirdly, the last characteristic noted by Paul in this passage, when a church is a church, it "abounds in thanksgiving." 2:7. Thanksgiving is the constant and characteristic note of the Christian life. Thanksgiving is the theme of every worship. Be thankful to God. Praise God continually. And be thankful to one another. Do you thank those who sing, who teach, who volunteer in the office, who cook, who serve in the community, who take stands for people? Giving thanks is a magnificent way to give strokes, to show support, to express love.

When a church is a church, it is loyal to God; committed to God's ideals and purposes, concerned about people, knit together in love, resolute in the faith, and abounding in thanksgiving! Let us be about the task!

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