

“WE ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul Untied Church of Christ, Taylor, June 6, 2021

A number of years back, our congregation hosted as a one of its Sunday evening book discussion programs a three-week shared reading of a modern fable which was popularly circulating among Christian churches at that time. The fable, published in a slim volume, was called *Who Moved My Church?* The story line was simple. Some dedicated church members show up on Sunday morning just as they usually do only to find their steepled edifice gone. Vanished—completely!

After absorbing the shock of all, the members huddle at their church’s one-time site and resolve to divide up into different groups in order to go looking for their church. The story which follows is full of vignettes of the many different personalities and outlooks that make up church life. In the characters depicted we encounter everyone from the soft-hearted and the sentimental to the pragmatic, tough-minded, and even hard-headed. The fable is also rich with pithy insights about congregational dynamics and the different leadership styles that can range from the passive and the evasive to the assertive and the confrontational with everything in between.

The overall message of the fable, which is as important today as it was years ago, is that the church is not a building—no matter how holy or hallowed a particular space or place may become for us. Instead, a church is people—God’s people, Christ’s disciples.

The late Reverend Opal Simmons, who was a frequent guest to our pulpit, understood this. Among her endearing ways was her manner of regularly addressing us as “Church.” Do you some of you remember that? In her soft-gently inflected but always articulate voice, she would say, “*Church*, God calls us today...” Or “*Church*, we come together...”

In talking to us as “the Church” Reverend Opal was being true to the original meanings of the word. In fact, the word church goes all the way to the ancient Greek tongue that our Christian forebearers spoke and which also served as the first language for all the Christian books of the Bible. In ancient Greek, *kyrios* means “ruler” or “lord” and *kyriakon* is the way the Greeks described something as being “of the Lord” and “belonging to the Lord.” Those places where Christians first gathered were *kuriakon oikia*, which translates as “the Lord’s house.” In everyday usage it got shortened to *kurkon*. This next got transported into the German language as *kirche*; into Scottish Gaelic as *kirk*, and into Old English as *circe*. Over long centuries all this evolved into our present-day English word *church*. Along the way, the term church also acquired the additional nuance of a people “of the Lord” *gathering* or *assembling* for shared purpose and mission.

Significantly, when Reverend Opal used to address us as *church*, there was nothing sterile or impersonal about it. Instead, she always pronounced the word with great sensitivity and warmth—a respect combined with affection for all of us gathered to worship God and renew

our devotion to him. In fact, as Reverend Opal knew, this is the way that Jesus wanted to think about ourselves as church—namely, as a people assembling and gathering, caring and sharing—all in witness to God’s greatness and God’s love and God’s healing and leading.

Did you hear our scriptural lessons for this morning affirming all this? In the first of our two gospel readings, one of Jesus’ disciples calls his attention to the marvels of the third Great Jerusalem Temple, which was built under the recent reign of King Herod the Great. By all accounts, it really was a magnificent edifice—something to write home about. Over the course of his own lifetime Jesus worshipped there many times. He had respect for the best of Judaism which it represented. At the same time, Jesus is not so awed as to forget that the Temple in all its resplendent glory is only man-made. Thus, he warns his disciple and all of us who have ears to hear that the beautiful building will not last. God alone is eternal. (*Mark 13:1-2*) Clearly, Jesus’ implied message here is that we need to keep our faith focused on higher things that do endure and eternally matter.

Elsewhere in his ministry, Jesus contemplates his church, not as a physical building, but as a coming together of men and women in God’s name to serve his holy purposes. As recorded in the Gospel of Matthew we hear Jesus saying: “For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.” (*Matthew 18:20*) That Jesus has a genuine church community in mind is also reflected in his statement that “what you prohibit on earth, will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven.” (*Matthew 18:18*) In other words, the church community which gathers in his name will have authority in spiritual and moral matters for the benefit and guidance of all the participants.

Amid his earthly ministry, Jesus designates the Apostle Peter as the “rock” on which his church will be built up. But here again Jesus does not immediately contemplate any physical building. Instead, he holds up the vision of a spiritual entity that under the foundational leadership of Peter and others will be able to prevail over the “powers of death.” (*Matthew 16:18*) Given the fact that Jesus believed that God’s kingdom would arrive sooner than later on earth, leading to the destruction of the Great Temple, he may not have seen any value in thinking about physical church buildings.

Significantly, the Apostle Paul, who was transformed by his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, ended up as a great church-builder in Jesus’ name. Yet he too keeps emphasizing the church as a spiritual body, more nimble and portable for that fact.

If you know your history, you know that those were tough times for Christians. To avoid the suspicious and wary eyes of Roman authorities who were ready to persecute and prosecute them, Christians had to meet undercover. In the city of Rome itself, vast underground catacombs or caverns used to bury the dead, were a favored secret meeting spot for Christian worship. A large, flat tomb could work pretty well as an altar. Ironically, church altars were later built to look like these tombs. The altar in our church sanctuary is no exception.

However, in more far-flung places where Roman authorities were less likely to be breathing down anyone's neck. Christians were at least able to gather undercover in local homes. That is, if one big enough could be found among the faithful to use in welcoming all.

At a time when pagans were so conspicuous in their temple building and even the Jews could claim as focal point for their worship one of the wonders of the ancient Mediterranean world, were Christians embarrassed that their own worship arrangements had to be so casual and haphazard? Maybe so. But in his personal preaching and letters, Paul would not let the Christian flock forget about the kind of "church building" that really matters. In his Letter to the Christians of Ephesus on a town that is today to be found along the Turkish coast facing Greece, Paul writes:

"So then, you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer; you are now citizens together with God's people and members of the family of God. You, too, are built on the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone, being Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a spiritual temple dedicated to the Lord. In union with him you too are being built together with the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit." (Ephesians 2:19-22)

The crux of Paul's message here is that what is truly spiritual is truly strong—as strong as any physical fortress, even stronger and more durable.

In a separate letter which the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth, which our Tuesday Morning Bible study recently together read in class, he talks further about the church as the living body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27) Once more, Paul's underlying message is that men and women who are one in the spirit of Christ are the church with a strength and tenacity that outshines what is merely or strictly physical in its construction.

Yes, the real church in every time and age is built and constituted by faithful folks. What we might construct of wood, steel, brick, and mortar to shelter our ministry, however important, valuable, and necessary, is secondary. Church buildings of brick and wood can be torched and burned by adversaries and accidents. Earthquake, tsunamis, and tornados can also sweep church buildings away. Look what happened to Jerusalem's Great Temple—just as Jesus predicted. In the year 70 A.D. it was totally obliterated by the armies of Rome. More locally, in 1911, a year before the sinking of the *Titanic*, our own second church building on this site was set afire by lightning flash, burning completely to the ground. Today, in Egypt, Iraq, and other once Christian nations of the Middle East, historic church buildings are being vandalized and destroyed all the time by hostile foes. But God's Holy Church as comprised of faithful men and women cannot be brought down so easily. And when a love of Christ and a desire to abide in his spirit is especially strong the church has discovered in its midst an incredible resilience and durability.

Who could have imagined that we would weather the past year and a half of the COVID-19 crisis as well as we have? Yes, there have been problems. Yes, there has been headaches,

heartaches, and heartburn. Yet we're still here. The church still *is*. Along the way, we've also learned new ways to be the church... By spacing out to be safely together. By going outdoors on Sundays other than picnic time. By becoming digital and virtual, while maintaining on site presence together whenever we can. Who knew that we could do all this? But in Christ we did—and we do.

This very morning we sit tented outdoors again on our fabulous church green. On the one side of us we have a full view of our woods, several acres deep. On the other side, we spy the classic outlines of our Colonial Revival building with its copper-spired steeple and bell tower reaching skyward. While part of me longs to be in the comfort of our hallowed sanctuary again with its organ and stained glass windows, here is good too and wisest for now. One of our neighboring churches to the north has taken the same path of wisdom. As our Sunday morning service outdoors finish, we will probably hear their music and hymn-singing starting up as we have on other occasions.

For forty years and more the Hebrews were a wandering people who gathered for worship within a tent and tabernacle. (*Book of Exodus*) The Jewish nation became so acclimated to the tabernacle worship that they were reluctant to head indoors when King David sought to build a permanent temple home for the Ark of the Covenant enshrining the Torah. (*2 Samuel 7:1-17*) It was only a generation later during King Solomon's reign the first Jerusalem Temple, now so fabled, could be constructed. (*1 Kings 8:1-13*) In nineteenth-century England and America where worshipers were commonly required to rent or purchase church pews for Sunday morning seating, the famous Wesleyan Movement, renewing the Church of Christ, also met in outdoor tents where everybody, rich and poor, could be welcomed. The tradition of tent revivals is also rich within our Protestant Christianity. And remember Billy Graham's open air stadium crusades?

All this is further testimony to the fact that God can be met wherever people of sincere heart and faith seek him. And the real church is to be found wherever two or three, or ten or twenty, or even a hundred and more, gather in Christ's name to recommit hearts and minds to his loving and always just ways. *Church*, wherever we find ourselves, may we always remember that we are men and women who really do belong to God. Whether we are indoors or out, gathered in a dwelling set aside for God that is humble or grand, we called to be abide together in worship and mission as the living body of God's son, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**