

What Is Church For?

*A sermon preached on James 1:17-27 and Matthew 16:13-20
on Sunday, September 8, 2024, by Emily Hull McGee
with First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

I.

I've told you before the story from Dr. Fred Craddock, the late pastor and storyteller, who shared about the first church he pastored. It was a small church in East Tennessee, not too far from the city of Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge was a city that grew and changed as technology did, and with that, the people of Oak Ridge changed as well. The small towns and country communities around it also grew, filling with single men and families drawn to the area to work, some even living in tents or trailer parks while they worked to save enough money to either return home or settle nearby.

Dr. Craddock's church was located very near where all these new folks had moved – a lovely little white church, warm and inviting-feeling, whose young pastor felt he should invite all these new folks to the city in to experience. Just imagine his surprise when his congregants weren't as excited. "Oh, I don't know," some would say, "I just don't think they'd fit in here." "Why spend the energy on outreach when these 'construction people,'" as someone called them, "would be leaving pretty soon?"

"No no," Dr. Craddock would say, "we need to invite the people in and make them feel at home, even if they would only be local for a while." Well as churches tend to do, they argued round and round about it, and even chose to vote on it the following week. There, a member of the church stood up and said, "I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own

property in the county." Someone quickly seconded it, and before you knew it, the measure passed. Dr. Craddock left that church soon after.

But years later, Craddock and his wife were traveling near Oak Ridge, and he decided that he wanted to take Nettie to see that little white church. It was hard to find, that little place, because the roads had changed over the years – the interstate, the country road, and finally the gravel road that would take them to the friendly little church. As they drove down the gravel road, he finally saw the church set back in the woods, gleaming white. Much to his surprise, the parking lot was full! Everywhere he looked, he saw trucks and cars and motorcycles packed into the lot. In awe, Fred and Nettie drove around and saw that the church even had a new sign on the front of the building: "Barbecue, all you can eat."

It was then that Dr. Craddock quickly realized that the church was no longer a church; for it had become a restaurant. It was packed with all kinds of people: locals and tourists, old folks and young folks, single folks and parents with little kids, construction workers and teachers, people who plant and people who leave – all sorts of folks. Dr. Craddock looked over the crowded former sanctuary and then over at his wife, Nettie, and said, "It's a good thing this is still not a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here."¹

II.

What is church for?

It's a question we're going to ask ourselves today and in this season, because perhaps you've never asked it, and perhaps we'll learn a thing or two by stumbling toward an answer. We talk about what the church does, and

¹ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, p28-29.

who the church is, and what the church believes, and who the church welcomes. We talk about how the church is funded, how they're governed, how they're led. We talk about what constitutes the church's values or vision, priorities or passion, beliefs or belonging. All meaningful, necessary questions. But again we ask: *what is church for?*

Scripture has a thing or two to say about this. Today's gospel reading from Matthew gives us the first use of the word we translate as "church" from the gospels. Jesus is talking with his disciples, and opens with a stunner of a question. "Who do people say that I am?" Their responses convey the range of mystery. "Some say John the Baptist," they respond. "Others Elijah, others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." Meaning: Jesus is familiar! We've seen this before! Jesus is like Prophet 2.0, Prophet: The Sequel, religion we know and understand.

Then Jesus turns to one – to Peter – and asks the question that cuts right to the heart: "but who do *you* say that I am?" It's always been leading here, this life and ministry of Jesus, who looks at each individual with that question. *Who do you say that I am? What have you experienced in the contours of your heart? What does my life mean to yours? So Peter, say with your lips... what am I for, for you?*

I think Peter speaks for us all when he says the gospel plainly: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." You are the anointed one, the one we've been waiting for, the liberator that has come to finally set us free. You are the Son – uniquely part of and separate from the Father – and Son of the living God. The Source. The Animator of life itself.

“Upon you, Peter,” Jesus responds, “you imperfect human, you ‘deny me and sink into the sea’ human,² upon you, Peter – *Petros* – this rock – *petra* – I will build my church – my *ekklesia*.” The gates of hell will not prevail. The keys of the kingdom will be yours. Meaning: the space and authority of my church matter to God. When you bind and loose, when you succeed and when you fail, what the set apart, “gathered and scattered church” will do means that you will be tethered always to the God who gives you life. There is no church without humans, and Peter, in all his humanity, was the first stone.

Of Peter, Barbara Brown Taylor says, “if Peter is the rock upon which the church is built, then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God’s chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness – that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time than we fall.”³

Church is for speaking: for Word made flesh and words of life.

And then from James, a short word of wisdom captured here in the New Testament, from which we will be studying this month. Scholars are divided about who authored James and when, but one hypothesis is that the author James is the brother of Jesus. The one who grew up with the Messiah, and played in the afternoon with the Son of God. Though we don’t know if this is true biologically, it is certainly true theologically.⁴

For to James, the words we say about Jesus matter only inasmuch as the actions we do because of Jesus. God’s word gives us life, of course, and that word needs our attention, but it has to activate some response within

² Thomas Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, p186.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Seeds of Heaven*, p74.

⁴ Martha L. Moore-Keish, *James, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, p10.

us! “Be ye doers of the word,” James says, “and not merely hearers only,” he says. Let that word do something in you! Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. If your speaking isn’t matched with your actions, James seems to say, then the religion you practice is worthless.

Church is for speaking. And church is for doing: for Word made flesh and words of life that we do.

III.

Drawn from scripture, 2000+ years of Christian theology has had much to say about what the church is. “We are one holy and apostolic church,” claims the Nicene Creed, identifying the unified gathering of believers, set apart for discipleship, linked to one another beyond border or difference.

Inasmuch as Christian theology has shaped our understanding of church, so too has Christian tradition and experience. In some ways, our understanding of church is what we inherit, for good or ill, drawn inherently from culture. In my grandparents’ lives, church was the hub, the tent pole of their life around which they revolved, a boundary, a holy constraint. Our Black siblings might say that the church, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, has a “bedrock role as the site of African American survival and grace, organizing and resilience, thriving and testifying, autonomy and freedom, solidarity and speaking truth to power.”⁵ Our Christian siblings in the global South might say that church is for drumming and dancing, for throngs of people across villages and towns united in praise and fasting. Our Christians siblings in Palestine might say church is for lament, for holding fast to peace while all around them is war. Survivors of abuse or abandonment at the hands

⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/weta/black-church/>

of Christians might say church is the wound that should be excised out. And these are but a handful in a world-full of answers.

So until we can answer the question, “what is church for,” we must answer first, “what is the church for me?”

IV.

Even as we ask it, we remember the words of Jesus to Peter and know that at the heart of the gospel, **church is for people.**

As a passionate seminarian, I (like many) had big feelings about the church, capital T, capital C. “The Church is too hypocritical, too partisan, too patriarchal, too angry. The Church should be more welcoming, more adaptive, more willing to change.” Yet the devastating truth is this: the church (capital T, capital C) **is, well, *people*.** It’s just people! Ordinary human beings like you and me. Where people are different, churches are different! Some have more structure and rules, others have more fluidity and spontaneity. Churches have drum sets and organ pipes, hipster pastors and robed pastors, protest marches and prayer groups, small groups and Sunday School classes, homeless members and billionaire members – and everything in between.

Pastor Martin Copenhaver marvels at this, saying, “to me, the affirmation that God can be found outside the church [in nature, in birdsong, etc.] has never seemed much of a claim. [Because, of course God is outside the church!] The true wonder is that God can be found *inside* the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another... God throws us together in the church and says, in essence, ‘here is where you get a chance to learn how to live with

other people, to forgive, and even come to see God in one another. After all, if you can find God here, you can find God anywhere.”⁶

Beyond our differences, over time, too many Christians have come to believe the lie that the Church is *against* more than it's *for*. We're against this idea, that policy, this thing happening in culture, you fill in the blank. That church is for building a wall toward the world, for beliefs as weights not tethers, for practices and policies intended to constrain, limit, inhibit. That church is a place like that little white church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, more concerned about who's in or out than they are to say that Jesus is the Messiah and go do that word in the world.

So again we ask, **what is church for?**

This will be but a drop in an ocean of possibilities, but let me offer a stab at an answer.

Church is for wrestling together with God's story of Love. Lauren Winner tells a story of a friend of hers, who, in preparation for her confirmation at the age of twelve, decided to back out. As she told her father, she just wasn't sure that she could believe all that the church told her she should, and she didn't want to make a promise she couldn't keep. That wise father of hers responded by saying, “what you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise when you are confirmed is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever.”⁷ Church is for being in that struggle.

Church is for Jesus, for patterning our lives on his and participating in his way of life. Mirsoslav Volf writes, “A church is an assembly, but an

⁶ Martin B. Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, p232.

⁷ Quoted in Debie Thomas, *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity*, p71.

assembly is not yet a church. An indispensable condition of ecclesiality is that the people assemble in the name of Christ.” Doing so knits us into a path and a way of life bigger than ourselves – giving us a chance to live, doing things that are “small enough to do, big enough to matter.”

Church is for gathering and scattering, for calling and sending. Indeed, in the words that Jesus said in Matthew, *ekklesia* is made up of the preposition “ek,” meaning “out of,” and the verb “kaleo,” meaning, “to call.” Thus, *ekklesia* means “to call out.” Over the years the word took on meaning as the gathering, the assembly, the dynamic movement of people living and moving in the way of Jesus.

Church is for waiting and remembering. “Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again,” we say. Debie Thomas tells a story of a 90 year-old woman in her church, sitting in her wheelchair beside Debie in the pew. At that point in the communion liturgy, she leans over to whisper with the ache of aging, “two thousand years. And *still*, we wait.”⁸

Church is for community, because it’s not that practicing your faith alone is *wrong*, it’s that practicing your faith divorced from the enfolded lives and stories of other Christians is simply *not enough*.⁹

What is church for? Church is for companionship and care. Church is for hope and imagination. Church is for sorrow and joy, which we all bring, sometimes at the same time. Church is for sinners and saints, which we all are, simultaneously, all the time. Church is a home for the lost, and a pilgrimage for the found. Church is for recognizing that our work matters, and that our work is always unfinished; that God needs our efforts and that

⁸ Ibid., p154.

⁹ Ibid., p65.

God doesn't falter when those efforts are clumsy or incomplete. Church is for memory, for embodiment, for particularity, for telling the truth, for new life when it seems impossible. Church is for dwelling close to the heart of God, for sharing the good news of Jesus, for breathing deeply in the Holy Spirit. Church is for singing. Church is for faith in motion. Church is for felt board Bible studies, for angry psalms and triumphant prophecies, for tall steeples and musty Sunday School rooms, for gatherings of people who love Jesus and want to talk together and live together. Church is for making disciples and pointing to the holy and cultivating joyful leaders and wondering how God is at work in the world together. Church is for ordinary resurrection and extraordinary reconciliation. Church is for speaking and listening, for feasting and fasting, for serving and receiving, for wildness and safety, for confession and reconciliation, forgiveness and grace. Church is for patience and urgency, for a kingdom that is now and not yet. Church is for tending together, and remembering together, and suffering together, and lamenting together, and bearing witness together, and hoping together, and living life *together*.

V.

What is church for? Is there anything more beautiful than that?

Now it's your turn. **What is church for?**

Amen!