

Today's worship and sermon continue our focus on the Grace Covenant around which our congregation gathers. Today, we focus on our statement of mission:

We have been summoned out of the futility and emptiness of mere existence to life together as one body in Christ, members one of another (Romans 12:5), to worship God; to grow in our awareness of God, knowledge of self, and exploration of the horizons of truth; and to show God's love for all people—especially to those living on the margin of despair.

My friend Carman Sharp was pastor of the Deer Park Baptist Church in Louisville in an aging, middle class, suburban community. Deer Park was like many churches in the 1970's that had experienced a steady decline in Sunday evening worship attendance following the advent of television. Carman was not a passive pastor. He had grown weary of struggling to maintain services that his congregation did not support and did not seem to want. He proposed ending Sunday evening services. After examining the facts, the deacons recommended to the congregation that Sunday evening services be terminated. In the congregational meeting, one member stood to plead for continuing the traditional Sunday schedule. She acknowledged that like most of the others in the congregation she no longer attended Sunday evening, but she could not stand the thought of her church being dark at 7:00 PM on Sundays. In response, one of the deacons, with all of the sincerity he could muster, stood and pledged that he would personally turn on the lights from 7:00 to 8:00 every Sunday evening. The people laughed; the motion passed.

Doing is tied to being. That brings up a question that has bothered Christians for centuries: what is the essential ingredient in the making of a church? Is it a lighted, empty building at 7:00 on Sunday evening? We have often been reminded that the church is more than a pile of bricks at a particular location: no people, no church. In the transition to practical matters, in Romans Paul used his favorite metaphor for church, the body of Christ. After a lengthy dissertation on the Holy Spirit and the divine purpose for God's people, Paul called for "spiritual worship" that involves presenting "your bodies as a living sacrifice." The Apostle to Gentiles was convinced that the church is a living, moving, active body of Christians living out the gospel of Christ in behavior both toward brothers and sisters within the church and to the children of God in the world.

What we *do* as a church is the effect of what we *are* as the people of God, the body of Christ. The Nicene Creed established the "marks" of the church—one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—and for the next seventeen centuries church Fathers discussed and wrangled over the meaning of the marks. Martin Marty wrote *A Short Story of Christianity* around the historical application of the four marks of the church. Luther and Calvin seemed to agree that the church is where the Word is rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments rightly administered. The salient word was, "rightly." Luther and Calvin did not fully agree on the qualities of *right* preaching and Sacraments. In practical consideration, the basic necessities of Church for Roman Catholics was a priest and an altar, but Vatican Council II stressed a strong biblical tradition that the Church is the People of God. The New Testament word for church *ekklesia* was a gathering of people. The noun was hardly static. It literally means, "called out." In Greek city-state democracy it was the town forum to which people were "called." It had close ties to the Jewish synagogue, a congregation gathered for the purpose of education and worship. The earliest Christians understood the church as a dynamic community of Jesus people empowered and moved by the Spirit of God to extend the work of Christ into all of the world.

Darrell Guder's book, *Missional Church*, complains that the typical religious bookstore in North America overflows with books on church development with "add-water-and-stir" formulas for success. We have a shelf full of "how-to" books on church development from the days when we were caught in the panic rush to church vitality. Good things came from studying church sociology, applying the growing understanding of group dynamics to congregational life, but the dehydrated packages of church growth formulas based on the success story of a few congregations were the standards for church ministry in the past decade. At least a part of the problem was the tendency to define "success" by size and expansion. Even while I was chasing the formulas for success I was bothered by the corporate business model of doing church. We got caught up in that old saw, "what's good for General Motors is good for America," only we now had church versions of General Motors like Willow Creek and Saddeback. A funny thing emerged in the imitation of the business model for church. Some of us noticed that businesses were imitating the church. Long before it became popular, the church was about mission. What we did not understand was that having a mission statement does not make a missional church any more than having a mission statement is an automatic path to successful marketing.

Imitations are never as good as the real thing. When I set out on the journey of pastoral ministry, Billy Graham was the model for young evangelicals. Church revivals were about as entertaining as Elvis

impersonations as we watched young ministers wave their red Scofield Bibles in the air shouting, “the Bible says,” with an affected North Carolina accent. I recall the later wisdom in Fred Craddock’s advice to young preachers: “Be who you are.” The advice fits the church as well as the preacher.

Just out of Baylor University and headed for seminary, I served a growing suburban church in Houston as Youth Director. We had about a hundred teenagers involved at some level. I also directed the youth choir of some forty kids, and word got around the area that we had a formula for success. The old Broadway Baptist Church nearby was in a racially changing neighborhood near the point of collapse. They invited me to come on a Sunday evening with my youth choir and rally the congregation. My head was turned, but alas, a visitation of youth did not change the age of the congregation or their location. They continued to decline, coveting the success of our young congregation. Imitation was not the answer then or now. Doing the church grows out of being the church that we are.

The church exists by mission. For the past half-century Western Christians have been mourning the decline of the European churches. Magnificent cathedrals constructed at the peak of medieval Christianity now stand as monuments to a day long past, little more than museums of Christian art painted on the walls and designed in the windows. Whatever the reason for decline, monuments to the memory of Jesus fall short of the meaning of church. The people called out and called together as the *ekklesia* of God were called to living witness to the life of Christ in the body of Christians rather than a mausoleum to house a lifeless body. The earliest Christians left very few monuments behind. They worshiped in private homes and later underground in the catacombs of Rome where the earliest remnants of Christian art survived the centuries. Their presence and permeation of the Roman world and their writings were their legacy for the ages to come.

Church is something we do. Church grammar appropriately has a verbal sense of *doing* church rather than *attending, remembering, or observing* church. Donald Miller, *The Nature and Mission of the Church*, rings familiar bells when he recites a litany of misconceptions of church mission. Miller’s examples: sending out evangelists to convert people in foreign lands like China and Africa; a rescue ministry for street people in the middle of a large city; sending food and clothing to alleviate rural poverty. Miller insists that mission is not an appendix to the church program; “It is the body of Christ expressing Christ’s concerns for the whole world.” More than four decades ago J. C. Hoekendijk called for the church to turn inside out, to quit thinking in terms of ecclesiastical structures and clerical ministries and begin to realize that the mission of the church is what the laity does in the world. Emil Brunner said: “The Church exists through mission as fire exists by burning.”

The mission of our church is living 24-7 the life of Christ within us.

Our mission begins with worship. Far too much significance has been given to music and worship style and far too little to the genuine encounter with God when the *ekklesia* is called out to corporate worship. The question that transcends style and tradition is the experience of God in our midst. Paul called for spiritual worship in physical bodies. We do need to come together in order to meet God. We can get the sermon later in print, we have heard some of the hymns before, the prayers may contain phrases that have been repeated so often that we need to assign numbers, but in spite of our human weakness, people who come together with a sincere desire to meet God, do-meet God, that is.

Our mission thrives on education. Before we go, we are here to grow, “in our awareness of God, knowledge of self, and exploration of the horizons of truth.” The church’s mission has an internal dimension that reaches in to the brothers and sisters in the family of faith and builds the *koinonia* the communion of the family. Growing in faith is a community affair. Rigid walls of theology and creeds do not create a living body of Christ. A community of people challenging and helping one another is far more effective than a multitude of Lone Rangers.

Our mission extends “God’s love for all people—especially to those living on the margin of despair.” *Outlook* and *outreach* are basic to church life. We love because we have been loved. To follow Jesus means to live out an incarnational faith of putting your body where your heart is. As the Word became flesh to dwell among us in Christ, his church is steadfast in finding ways to extend his bodily presence in his people to the need of the world.

What is the essential ingredient to the making of a church? It certainly goes beyond turning on the lights once or twice a week. Even this little body of Christ must find ways turn on the lights for God’s children in the darkest corners of the earth.