

Continue the Good Work

Today we begin a new sermon series called The Church. And over the next few weeks, we will use the book of Acts – the New Testament book that most deals with the development and work of the early church, to think about questions like “What is the church?” “What work are we called to do?” “How can we live into being God’s hope in the world?”

These questions are particularly pertinent to us right now at a time when more and more people distrust institutional religion, often believe the church is more of a force for bad rather than good, and primarily identify church people as being judgmental rather than loving. And yet, while participation in institutional religion is declining, spirituality is not. More and more people are identifying as spiritual but not religious or as people who admire Jesus but not a fan of Jesus’ church, or people who have found a whole range of ways to connect with the transcendent or the divine outside the organized church. So the question for us, then, is in this context of increasing secularization, of a wide range of spiritual practices, and a deep distrust of institutional religion, what is our calling as the Church?

First, I think it’s important for us to acknowledge (as the church as often failed to do throughout its history) that we do not have a monopoly on connecting people with God. Rather than fretting over the number of people who are finding spirituality outside of the church, I think we should celebrate it. Earlier this week, I was talking with Jeff Johnson, our former pastor, and we were talking about the impact of COVID on people exploring spirituality. Jeff pointed out that while the trend is that more people have not started to come to church after having gone through such a hard few years, there have been a whole lot more people who’ve started to get out in nature. Both Jeff and I agreed that while we both would like more people to go to church, we think being out in God’s creation is a really important and meaningful way to grow spiritually and to connect to God. God is no more confined to the walls of church buildings than air can be contained inside this building. God’s spirit is at work in the world both inside and outside institutional religion and that is something to celebrate. And I think that is a really important concept for us to grasp because how we think about God being at work in the world has everything to do with how we live out being Church for the world.

If we think God is only at work through the church, then our job is to try to make people like us – to try to make them good church people. This way of thinking about church creates insiders and outsiders – there are church members and not members, there are the saved and the unsaved, there are the believers and the unbelievers. And it is this understanding of church that, at least in my opinion, has turned off so many people.

But here’s the thing, this is not actually the vision of church we see in the Book of Acts. For the early Christians, their concern was with feeding the hungry, meeting people where they were, caring for the sick. In fact, the early Christians were called the “followers of the Way,” meaning they were the people who walked in the way of Jesus, not people who thought they were starting a new religion. And we have the most details about how they went about following the way of Jesus in the book of Acts.

Now Acts is actually meant to be a sequel to the Gospel of Luke – same writer, same audience. Whereas the gospel of Luke tells about the life and work of Jesus, the book of Acts tells about the life and work of the early church continuing the work that Jesus started. The primary mission of the church, then, is to continue the good work that Jesus began. That alone should tell us that any effort that focuses solely on building up the institutional church is missing the mark. Rather than seeking to build himself up, Jesus completely and totally emptied himself for the sake of the world. Jesus gave all he had to love the world and to share God's love with the world. Those who followed him did so not because he told people that they must follow him to have access to God. Rather, those followed him did so because he loved them, healed them, cared for them. In other words, the decision to follow Jesus was a response to all the ways Jesus loved them rather than a prerequisite for receiving that love.

That in a nutshell is the work of the church – to love and care for the world just as Jesus did. And yet, there's just one problem – we aren't Jesus. If you stop and think about it for a minute, it seems crazy that God would entrust the work of Christ to the group of people we read about in Acts, and by extension that God would entrust that work to us. In the passage we read, Jesus tells this group of people to stay in Jerusalem and receive the Holy Spirit and then share God's love with the whole world. This is the same group of people who completely abandoned Jesus when the soldiers arrested him. The same group of people that constantly misunderstood Jesus' mission during his life. The same group of people that often argued among themselves who was greater. And it's these people that Jesus is trusting. And it's people like them that Jesus continues to trust – people like us, people who sometimes act selfishly, people who sometimes take the easy way out, people who sometimes spend more energy arguing rather than loving. I certainly fit that description. And yet, Jesus said to them and continues to say to us – You are the ones who I want to continue the good work that I began.

Jesus wants to make sure we know that we don't have to do it alone. He says the Holy Spirit will come upon them in Jerusalem. That in the very place where they abandoned Jesus, in the very place where they all ran away when things got hard, there they would receive God's spirit, and there they would begin the work to which they were called. It's almost like Jesus is saying, "You can do this, even here, even in Jerusalem, the place where I died and you abandoned me, even here, you can continue to the good work." And you can do this precisely because my spirit will be with you. I find this to be such profound good news. The church does not have to be perfect. The church never will be perfect. The people in it will never be perfect. And yet, Jesus still trusts us. The Spirit is still working through us.

But here's the thing, we don't have to be perfect, but we do have to learn to see the world and the people in it the way God sees it. After telling the disciples that they will receive power from the Holy Spirit, they ask Jesus, "Is this the time you will restore Israel." They still believed that this good work was only for their tribe. But Jesus had something else in mind. He told them, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the Earth." The good work is not just for their people, it is not just for those near them, it is for everyone – even for their enemies like the Samaritans. You see, at the very beginning of Jesus' commission to the early church, he explicitly tells them they have to stop thinking of God's people in terms of insiders and outsiders. There are only insiders with God. And what we will see throughout the book of Acts, and really throughout the rest of the New Testament is the early Christians

wresting with this question of inclusion. And time and again, we are going to see that the Holy Spirit always leads them to draw the circle wider. And I know you hear me say this all the time and I must sound a bit like a broken record but I'm going to keep saying it because I truly believe that the very foundation of our work as God's church depends on us learning to see all people as God's people. God's spirit tells the church must be a community that transcends those divisions, that appreciates difference, that accepts and welcomes all people for who they are.

And that is one of the main reasons why our job is not to make good church people, why our job is not to try to tell the "spiritual but not religious crowd" that they are missing out on God because God's kingdom is bigger than even we can imagine. We don't have to build God's kingdom like it's some kind of fortress. All we have to do is to witness to its ever present reality by loving like Jesus loved.

That's our job as church -- to love like Jesus loved. Our passage ends with Jesus being taken up into heaven and as the disciples are staring up into the sky, a messenger comes and says, "Why are you looking up into heaven?" It's like the angel is telling them, "Hey, it's up to you now. Stop staring into the sky, stop waiting for heaven to move, and you get busy. You live into the heavenly reality right now." And that's exactly what they do. From this moment on, the book of Acts tells the story of how this imperfect group of people get busy continuing the work that Jesus began by loving and serving the world around them.

Like Jesus, they healed the sick.

Like Jesus, they fed the hungry.

Like Jesus, they forgave their enemies.

Like Jesus, they loved each other and the world around them.

Now throughout Acts, there are a couple of instances where the writer tells us that the Lord added to their number. Their church was growing. But guess what, never did they say, "Let's figure out how we can grow our church by 10%." Rather, they had conversations about how to make sure there wasn't a needy person among them. They had conversations about how to make sure all of the widows in their community had food to eat. They had conversations about learning to include and welcome the Gentiles into their formerly all-Jewish community. You see, they never set out to create an institutional religion. They set out to love like Jesus did. And when people did join the church, it was in response to that love.

As a pastor, I've read more books about church growth strategies than I care to tell you about. I've heard so much fretting from religious professionals like me about the decline of the church. And it's not that there's not some good things to think about in these church growth strategies or that we should be concerned about the decline of the church. But rather, it's when that becomes our focus, we forget our whole reason for existing in the first place. God is going to work in the world with or without the church. The early church was called to be a witness to that work by loving like Jesus loved. And the rest seemed to take care of itself.

That's the good work to which they were called. That's the good work to which we are called. So as the angel said to them, "Don't stare up at heaven. But get to work in the world," may we too get busy being the Church for the world around us. Amen.