

Last week, I had the opportunity to go to Opening Day for the Dayton Dragons. The game got rained out, which made me think about how similar the Dayton Dragons are to Church.

I know that sounds odd, but allow me a short digression:

Since Easter, we've been exploring what it looks like to live in this Between space - between Jesus' Resurrection and the Day he comes back to finish what the Resurrection started. Last week, we saw that we are called to live a holy life - a life that is different from the world. A life that looks like the Way of Jesus, not like the ways of the world that lead to death.

One of the most visible ways people who follow Jesus are different from people who don't is this thing we're doing right now: Church. If I asked you to make a list of behaviors that make Christians different, I assume you'd list "going to Church" pretty high. So it's worth spending some time together, considering what the Church is.

If you're like me, you default to thinking about Church as this space. "Church" is what we do one day a week (give or take). On a Sunday morning. Usually. If we're not too busy.

In fact, if you think about being holy as being different, then this understanding of Church as a different place and different time makes a lot of sense. We go to Church to be holy because Church is a different time (Sundays, which are different from the ordinary days) and at a different place (this building, which is pretty different from your house or office). It's special. Set apart. Different. Holy.

Makes sense. The problem is that it's not very biblical. Calling *this* "Church" is far from what God has in mind for those who follow Jesus.

And that's actually really good news. After all, if we're talking about the massive difference between God's way and the ways of the world, if we're claiming that one of these paths leads to life and all the others lead to death, but then we say, Well the *main* difference amounts to what you do for about 4 hours a month...

...

That seems a little silly, doesn't it?

Surely the sum total of our life with God *isn't* what goes on in this room an hour a week? Surely when we make these grandiose claims about Jesus rising from the dead and offering us new life that doesn't just mean... now you get to spend a bit of your time listening to some guy talk and wave his arms around! Yay!

No. That's obviously not it. When God talks about Church in the Scriptures, something much bigger is going on. The new life we're called to is much bigger, much fuller than that.

It's really a problem of language. Today, when I hear the word 'Church' I think "building". I grew up in the midwest. We have "churches" on every corner in this part of the country. We've got towns around here with a First, Second, Third and Fourth Baptist Church.

How we talk about Church reflects our assumption that Church is this place. We "go" to church. We say, "it's time for Church", "Hurry up or we'll be late for Church". I don't want to "miss" Church. Can you tell me how to "get to the Church?"

All of that says that Church is particular time and particular place. We can mark it on a map. We can set our clocks by it. We can miss it.

It's too bad we don't speak ancient Greek. Because the word the Bible uses for "church" is *ekklesia*. [graphic illustrating *ekklesia*] It literally means "called together". When the first Christians experienced the resurrection of Jesus, and they started meeting together and doing a lot of the same things we do in here, they wanted a word to describe what they were doing.

And they chose the word "*ekklesia*". They said, we're the "called together". It was a word Greek people used to talk about a group that met for a purpose (as opposed to people who were just hanging out, or a mob, or a crowd). An *ekklesia* met on purpose, for a purpose.

In that regard, a Church is much more like a PTA or a Rotary Club, or even the crowd at the Dragons game. In fact, that's what I meant earlier about the Dragons game being sort of like Church.

After all, what constitutes a Dragons game? Clearly not everything that happens in that stadium is a Dragons game. Little league games that get to play in the stadium are *clearly* not Dragons games. Neither are the concerts they hold in there. A few weeks ago, our staff had an offsite meeting in the stadium. And as fun as that was, it wasn't a Dragons game. Not even close.

And I tried to go to a Dragons game on opening day. But it got rained out. So even though the players were in the stadium and it was full of fans and they were selling hotdogs, it wasn't a Dragons game.

It's not the building (or stadium) that makes for Dragons baseball. It's the team, and the fans. It's this group of people *when they are called together for a particular purpose* (in this case, baseball). In fact, the Dragons can play baseball somewhere else, and it's *still* a Dragons game.

It's not even necessarily that the things we do in Church are that different from what we do at a baseball game. We all know sports fans who have what we would describe as a religious zeal for their team (I'm looking at you Ohio State fans). They're evangelistic in spreading the Gospel of their team pride. And when we go to baseball games, we all stand up and sing songs together. We have rituals to open the game. And I'm not saying peanuts and crackerjacks are exactly the same as communion, but it's pretty fascinating that eating and drinking together is so fundamental to big groups of people getting together. [picture to illustrate?]

No, what really makes PTA different from the Dayton Dragons or the Rotary Club or a Board Game Convention is the *purpose*.

The Church is not a building, it's the people.

We are the *ekklesia*, the "called together". So the question we should ask is: Why are we called together? What's our purpose? What makes us different, unique? What makes us the Church and not the PTA or the Dragons or the Rotary?

Surely it has to be more than coming in here and singing some songs and listening to me talk. After all, it's not like God needs our songs, our worship. Like God sits around sad all week listening to My Chemical Romance on his iPod//playing solitaire [picture?] because no one's here to keep him company and then gets all excited on Sundays because we came to visit.

Obviously that's not it.

But Church also can't just be about *me*. How many of us think of Church as primarily another product to consume? What matters most when we "come to Church" is that we "get something out of it." You hear Church people talk about this by saying "I got fed today" or "there just wasn't much meat in there today."

We really like food.

Surely the Church isn't just a spiritual Golden Corral, right? Where we put out this big smorgasboard of stuff - music and prayers and sacraments and preaching - and hope you like it enough to come back and tell your friends how fulfilling it was. Surely when God called us to a new life, to following Jesus, it's about more than just *feeling* better one day a week?

What purpose were we called together for? What is Church?

One of the most powerful descriptions of the Church in the Scriptures is the book of Ephesians. Let's look together at that description in Chapters 2-3. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. If you don't own a Bible, please keep that one with our complements!

I'm going to show you the highlights of the passage, but you'd do well to read through the first three chapters on your own this week. Beginning in chapter 2, here's how the writer of Ephesians describes it:

We are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago... So now you Outsiders are no longer foreigners and immigrants. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself... -- Ephesians 2:10, 19-20

Here, the author says God has given us new life - recreated us - so that we can "do the good things planned for us long ago." When we join the Church, we become part of God's people. We are an international body that stretches back to the beginning of time. We become part of an eternal people who are princes and princesses in God's kingdom. We are God's building. Not this space. We are. God has called us all together and now we are shaped according to a purpose. In Chapter 3, we get a clearer picture of that purpose:

God did not reveal [the Gospel] to previous generations, but now by his Spirit he has revealed it to his holy apostles and prophets. And this is God's plan: Both Outsiders and Insiders who believe the Good News share equally in the riches inherited by God's children. Both are part of the same body, and both enjoy the promise of blessings because they belong to Christ Jesus."-  
- Ephesians 3:5-6 (NLT)

The plan, the purpose God has called us all to? It's to share the Good News! Specifically the Good News that thanks to Jesus, there's no such thing as a foreigner anymore. There are no more outsiders. God has opened the borders of his Kingdom and all are welcome to become not just citizens, but children of the King.

*That's* what we come together to do. *That's* the purpose God has for us. We are proclaimers. Announcers of God's new life. Heralds of the new kingdom bursting forth in the midst of this old one.

How do we do that? Fortunately, the early church preserved a record of their beginnings. Look with me at Acts 2 (in our Bibles, page XXX). We can look back at how *they* acted when they were called together for clues to what we should do today.

All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord's Supper), and to prayer. A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need.

They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord's Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity-- all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. - Acts 2:42-47 (NLT)

They studied together. They hung out. They shared meals. They prayed together. They were outrageously generous together. They worshiped together at the Temple (which is more or less what this space is) *and* met together in their homes to eat together (they ate a lot back then too, apparently).

When Jesus rose from the dead and people started to experience this new life that was available to them, it was too big for just the Temple building. It spilled over into the streets, into their homes. It couldn't be contained on just the Sabbath day. It burst out into the other six days, filling the whole week with this profound, powerful, exciting news that the boundary between God and humanity was gone. The borders between citizens and foreigners was gone. Jesus tore down the wall that kept immigrants out of God's kingdom. And now *nothing* could keep all these new insiders from celebrating.

Not just at the Temple, but anywhere. Everywhere. That's what Jesus promised would happen. When he was teaching his disciples, he told them,

If two of you agree here on earth concerning anything you ask, my Father in heaven will do it for you. For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them. - Matthew 18:19-20 (NLT)

To take Jesus' words seriously would be a revolution for the way we think of Church. Church is not a building we go to once a week.

Church is what happens anytime two people who love Jesus get together and celebrate the Good News. Maybe they're getting together to study the Scriptures together. Maybe they're meeting to

pray. Maybe they're getting together and sharing a meal. Or plotting some outrageous act of service or generosity.

Church can happen anywhere. Any time. All it takes is two people who love Jesus, who come together to celebrate the Gospel.

**[band come up when I start talking about my small group]**

My connection group meets at Potbelly on Tuesday nights. So most weeks, a small group of guys gets together, some of us buy sandwiches, and we just hang out. We talk about what's happening in our lives, we go through the discussion questions in the bulletin.

A few weeks ago, one of the guys shared a confession. Since I'm a pastor, he looked at me and said, "Don't get offended, but this group is as important to me as Sunday morning. Maybe more." And before I could say anything, a couple of the other guys chimed in with "Yeah, me too!"

There was a general consensus around the table that this group was as vital - maybe *more* vital - to our spiritual lives, to experiencing the new life Jesus promises us, as this Sunday morning experience.

When they said that, I wanted to jump out of my chair and cheer. Because *that* is what Church is all about.

Church is what happens any time people who love Jesus get together and share in the new life we've found in Jesus.

That's why it's appropriate that we celebrate the Communion meal together today. The Church has always used Communion as a primary marker of our identity. Because the Communion meal represents Jesus' death and resurrection. The Communion meal is what forms us as God's Temple, God's people.

When we eat the gluten-free wafer, we remember that Jesus' body was broken for all of us, to tear down the wall between us and God.

And when we dip the wafer in the grape juice, we remember that Jesus' blood was poured out to reconnect us with God, to open the way back to life.

You don't have to be a member here to take communion. Today, Jesus' table is open to anyone who wants to choose Jesus' life, anyone who wants to be part of the Church.

[prayer]

I love this time we share together. I hope that much is clear. I love gathering with you and singing and praying and talking together. But far too often, we reduce Church to this space. This building. This time. When we do that, we reduce the Church to a small, weak, consumeristic product.

We reduce the eternal people of God, gathered from the four corners of the Earth to proclaim the good news that *no one* is exempt from God's rescue and redemption to a product we hope feeds us.

**[begin music]**

We are better than that. God has made us better than that. God has called us and empowered us and enabled us to be witnesses to the Good News.

Let's refuse to go to Church. Instead, let us commit to *be* the Church of God wherever we go.

Let's refuse a shallow, cheap, imitation of the eternal Church of God. Instead, let us commit to live holy lives that embody the new life God has called us to.

Let's refuse to wait for a particular day and time to worship God. Instead, let us gather with others who follow Jesus every day, at every time and proclaim the Good News of God's rescue by how we live.

Let's refuse to reduce Church to singing some songs and listening to me. Instead, let us announce God's good news in how seriously we take the Scriptures. In how we pray. In how insanely generous we are. In how we eat together.

Let's refuse to waste any opportunity. Instead, let every meal we eat be the Lord's Supper. Let every drink remind us of Jesus' rescue. Let every day, every place burst at the seams because it can't contain the outrageous radical power of Jesus' resurrection and rescue.

Let's quit going to Church, and instead let us commit to *be* the Church!

[song]

We're at the end of our time together today. But Church is *not* over. Church is just beginning. I want to give you an assignment this week. Or maybe better, think of it as an invitation:

This week, get together with another person and be the Church with them. Study together. Pray together. Share a meal or a cup of coffee. If you need a guide, grab one of these bulletins and use the Scripture Readings or Discussion Guide.

Go *be* the Church.

Before I speak a blessing over you, I want to welcome our guests:

### **Benediction**

You are God's church in Beavercreek. **You have been called by God** to be his own holy people. He made you holy by means of Christ Jesus, just as he did for all people everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. Through him, God has enriched your church in every way. This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true. Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will keep you strong to the end so that you will be free from all blame on the day when our Lord Jesus Christ returns.

God will do this, for he is faithful to do what he says, and he has invited you into partnership with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." -- 1 Corinthians 1:2-9 (NLT)