

Sermon 5/3/2020

Pastor Courtney Steitz

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Over the past several weeks I've heard many pastors and friends from seminary engaging in the conversation, "What is the Church?" We have all been forced to wrestle with this question as church buildings, not just in our own nation, but around the world have closed and locked their doors.. Martin Luther would have said that the church is a group of people gathered around Word and Sacrament—not about the building. In Greek the word for church, *ekklesia*, literally means the assembly, or the gathered group of people. It turns out that a church is not just a building, but that church is really about the people. But who is this group of people called "the Church"? How are they distinct from their building? What are they like?

Our passage from the book of Acts gives us a pretty good idea of what sorts of things the church is supposed to be about. In the early church there was teaching, fellowship, and communion. The new Christians cared for one another, shared their possessions, met together, and praised God. The early church met in all sorts of unlikely places—in homes, in synagogues, and even outside. It wasn't until later in history that churches became separate buildings. No one in the early church would have thought of a building when talking about church, they would have thought about the people.

But church is different than just a group of people—it's a group of people gathered around some specific things. Its people gathered around teaching and fellowship. In the past all of this took place within the confines of the church building, but now we are gathering together for Bible study and prayer and education over Zoom. Emails are going out with devotions for adults and resources for elementary school students. And every Sunday we gather together for worship in our own homes. It might feel different, but we are still a body gathered together.

And like the early church, during our time living under a stay-at-home order, we have begun the process of trying to reach out to others in new and different ways. Many of you have maintained connections with Holy Shepherd members and those in your community by making phone calls, many have given generously to the Action Center or Family Promise, and I know that several of our quilters and sewers have been hard at work making masks. And we have been praying, yes, we've been praying a lot—for those who are sick, for medical workers, and for other essential workers. In many ways, we have begun the process of looking beyond ourselves as a community to serve others.

And we certainly have been praising the Lord. Lots of people have been working hard to create worship experiences for Sundays and especially during Holy Week. While we have prayed fervently for the needs in our community, I have also heard many of you giving thanks to God for the many gifts that God has given during this time. In the midst of hardship and uncertainty many of you have found ways to continue to praise and give thanks to God.

In so many ways, despite the pandemic, despite having to stay at home, and despite closing the church doors for a time, we have continued to be church. Even though the governor's "stay-at-home" order has been lifted, for the safety of all in our community we will continue to be and do church in this new way, at least for a while. Even as we continue to watch worship on YouTube and gather together for Bible study over Zoom, we are still church. We are still the body gathered around the Word and

worship. We are still a group of people who gather together in fellowship and service—we just look a little different than we did a couple of months ago.

And that may also be the gift of this pandemic. We are being forced to reimagine church. When we think about what unites us, we can no longer point to the church building itself. We are discovering what really unites us as a community—deep relationships, generosity, and worship. We are having to stretch our minds and our creativity to reimagine how we might be gathered together and how we might reach beyond ourselves to serve others.

My prayer for us as a community going forward is twofold. I want us to pay attention to and give thanks for the strengths in our community that have risen to the surface. The Spirit has clearly gifted so many of you to care, serve, and lead during this time. It is humbling to reflect on all the ways that God is at work among us even as we practice social distancing and learn new ways of doing ministry.

The second part of my prayer is that even when we are free and safe to gather in the building of Holy Shepherd once again that we will remember the lessons we have learned and the strengths that have been revealed. My prayer is that we will get to return to the norm of greeting each other before worship, sharing the peace, and partaking in communion. But that we will not return to business as usual. May we continue to live into the lessons we have learned about sharing our resources for the sake of others. May we continue to be brave when it comes to trying new things for the sake of connecting with those outside our walls. And may we continue to be a community defined above all else by giving thanks, prayer, and praising the Lord.

Amen