

John 20:19-31
March 30, 2008

South Plains
2nd Sunday in Easter

What Good Is The Church?

What good is a thing like the church? Debby and I have different standards for assessing usefulness. If you have ever seen my study in the Manse, you may have noticed that I am very thrifty. I save things that I might need some day. That's how I know a thing is good, if I might need it. Debby is thrifty in her own way, but she is more of a user. If she does not foresee a use for a thing, that means it is no good to her and she does not save it. Many people today cannot see a use for the church; and therefore they have no affirmative answer to the question, "What good is the church?"

It's a fair question and it can be a healthy question when it focuses our attention on the fundamental mission of the church, the usefulness of the church. Now the mission of the church and the usefulness of the church are not the same, but they do overlap. So, I'd like to spend some time this morning on the Sunday after the most important week on the church's calendar to look at that question with you. What good are we to God, to ourselves and to the world God created?

In the last two chapters of John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and speaks to their future, our present. In the first part of our story, the disciples have locked the doors of the house because

they are afraid that the Jewish authorities, who think that Jesus is finally out of their hair, will think it's time to arrest his disciples. At that moment, the risen Lord appears and says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

"Peace be with you." It's a quiet, soothing way to begin worship on Sunday morning. "Peace" is a word that can be as bland as serving Jell-O for dessert or as soothingly meaningful as a cup of hot tea or coffee with your best friend. For disciples with the smell of death still in their nostrils, a word of peace from the living Jesus must have calmed their fears.

But, the resurrection appearances of their Master were not just comfort food. Jesus offers them a commission, and that commission is ours as well. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

Jesus is not done. The work of Jesus in the world is not finished with the resurrection. The mission God sent Jesus to accomplish will go forward because Jesus is sending us to spread his message, to imitate his works of mercy, and to be his surrogates before the world. So, for anyone who wonders what Jesus expects of his followers, John's Gospel is clear. Jesus sends us to do his work, the work God the Father sent him to do.

All of us here today can agree, I suspect, that the mission of Jesus, the example he set and taught, his deeds of compassion and his words of wisdom, are all

worth repeating. No one can do it the way Jesus did. Nevertheless, we know what his standard of excellence requires. We know the results in individual lives were spectacular. And, I believe most people can agree that when the disciples of Jesus are at their best, they do good work. But, what good is the church?

I want to argue that when the church acts like an institution, it is no better nor worse than other institutions – banks, Rotary Clubs, charitable agencies or government. But when the church acts like followers, disciples of Jesus, then we express our real genius, the unique usefulness given by God in Christ. These verses from the conclusion of the Gospel of John give us insight into our identity as a church.

I don't mean to imply that we can ever escape the institutional side of the church. As soon as we begin to meet at an appointed time for worship and take offerings we begin acting like an institution. And, I believe we have a moral obligation to be an example of the best institutional practices. But, we are always more than another institution. We are a church.

Listen to John 20:21-13 again.

A church, Jesus tells us, is in the business of offering peace and forgiveness. The two things that make more Presbyterians suspicious about church are right here in this passage. One is the passing of the peace in Sunday worship. Some Presbyterians welcome

the opportunity to shake hands with their neighbors in the middle of worship. Most are uncomfortable, because it interrupts the flow, the peacefulness of worship. The other thing that makes us uncomfortable and suspicious is the idea that the church has the power to forgive and retain sins. Who gives this institution the right to say some sins are forgiven and other sins are unforgiven?

Offering peace and offering forgiveness should be two sides of the same coin. And, they can be when they are personal, when they can be received as a gift from a friend, even a gift from an unfamiliar friend.

Where we lose touch with our mission is when we try to institutionalize personal forgiveness. Whenever the church tries to become the official conscience of the community or the nation, we have institutionalized sin and forgiveness. Whenever we assume the posture of the judge of morality, declaring some innocent and other guilty, we institutionalize the forgiveness and retention of sins. This does not mean we have to remain silent in the face of sin, only that we stand with the sinners under judgment.

Isn't that why the church today is bogged down with sexuality? We're all trying to stand with the righteous who know what God really wants instead of standing with sinners who know only that we all fall short of the glory of God.

Remember that it is in John's Gospel that Jesus commands his disciples to love one another. We are the people who are to be known by the love we share and spread around the world. This is the way we reveal God's love for the world, the love which moved God to send his Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. Jesus doesn't have to condemn people or judge people, and neither do we. People judge themselves.

After that familiar passage we know as "John 3:16" Jesus goes on to say, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light...(3:19)." When the world sees the quality of love that Jesus demonstrates, and when people see this love acted out in the life of the church, they have a choice. They can either respond with love themselves, or they can reject that love and respond with indifference or hatred. To reject love means to retain one's sin, or to hold on to an attitude of indifference toward wounded and hurting neighbors. To accept love means to accept the forgiveness offered by Jesus.

In this same passage, Jesus invades the personal space of his disciples in a very physical way. Reading these verses two thousand years later, we can safely romanticize the action. But, think about it. Jesus breathes on his disciples. He shows his wounded hands and side. When Thomas comes on the scene, he encourages him to feel the nail holes and insert his hand into the spear wound.

The peace that Jesus is offering is not an institutionalized ritual where everybody has to do it the same way at the same time. For some of the disciples, and perhaps for many of us, it is enough that Jesus comes with words of peace to resuscitate our spirits. For Thomas, and for some of us, Jesus will pull up his shirt and share our woundedness with his own wounds.

Jesus' peace is a blessing over our doubts, our fear of death and dying, and our anxiety over the future. Jesus offers a benediction over the woundedness of humanity, an acceptance of our betrayals and sinning, a grace to meet our unbelief. The physicality of his breath and his wounds is one final affirmation that Jesus identifies with us in our humanity and our weakness.

I think that's the clue to the usefulness of the church, the good that the church can be and do for the world, for ourselves and for the God we worship. When people see wounds in the church that come from loving others, they see the love of God in Christ. Those wounds come from misunderstandings, from money given to undeserving people, from failed attempts to serve the community, and, yes, from the embarrassment of giving sinners too much slack.

A few years ago, the evening national news carried the story of a young man arrested for selling brownies laced with marijuana. He was caught peddling his bicycle and peddling his drugged sweets in a mid-

American suburb in broad daylight. The tagline of the story identified him as the custodian in a Presbyterian Church. The whole country got a chuckle from the absurdity of that picture of a church employee selling dope as he peddled his bicycle.

I was the minister who hired that custodian for the church I served. We knew his background included substance abuse and mental illness. But, we also knew his family. The personnel committee pondered his job application and came to the conclusion that we had to try him out. While he worked for our church, he was no threat to anyone. His presence was a risk we were willing to take. I still believe that was one of the best examples of down home Christian ministry I've ever been a part of. I hope it demonstrated to every substance abuser (and they are in every congregation) that the church of Jesus Christ, the followers of Jesus, have not forgotten the example of the one who befriended sinners.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us, "You are the light of the world (5:14)." In John's Gospel, he says, "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds are done in God (3:21)."

In welcoming people to the light, we give away the forgiveness of God, free of charge. And in some strange, mysterious way, we retain their sins when they turn away from the light of the God that shines through us. What a

fearful responsibility we have as representatives of Jesus Christ.

In the light of that weighty and joyful duty, I'm going to invite you to offer the peace of Christ to one another after the benediction today. For now, let us ask for the peace of God in our own hearts and minds.