

“Be the Church”
Hebrews 13: 1-8, 15-16
September 9, 2007

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of sharing lunch and a great conversation with a friend. It was one of those rare, exciting, wide ranging, mind expanding conversations that knew no limits. As I munched on corned beef and fries, we waxed philosophical and theological as we talked and wondered, and hypothesized about God, Jesus, creation, and the wonders of the universe. What is faith? How did God create the world? How did Jesus resurrect from the dead? It was exciting, challenging, and comforting all at the same time.

But then as we stood up to leave, my friend threw me a curve ball. Perhaps it was even more like one of Dice K's gyro balls, as we stood there at the counter preparing to pay for the meal, he asked me a final question that caught me so off guard that for the first time all afternoon I was speechless. What was this question that left me standing there staring blankly at the rack of gum and mints on the counter next to the register? His question was this, *“What is your Church's mission? What is its purpose? What are you trying to achieve?”*

On first consideration, it might seem odd to you that after sailing to the outer reaches of the theological universe, after asking and answering some of the most puzzling and difficult questions of the Christian faith, why would a question so simple as *“What is your Church's mission?”* leave me standing there like a rookie swinging blindly at a Tim Wakefield knuckleball? (That'll be my last Red Sox allusion, I promise.)

The reason that the question caught me so off guard, and left me so off balance is because it snapped me like a bullwhip out of the heady and unpredictable world of Christian theology and into the flesh and blood world of Christian living. It yanked me out of the realm of thought, and into the arena of action. It snapped me out of what might be, and tossed me headlong into the world of what is, or what should be. It reminded me of the one of the most essential truths in all of the Christian life. And that truth is, as it concerns the Christian faith, what matters most isn't so much what you know, as it is who you are and what you do.

Let me put it this way, even if you have memorized copious amounts of scripture, even if you can remember every single word that Jesus ever spoke, quoting chapter and verse, even if you can read the Bible in Greek and Hebrew and explain even the most difficult theological propositions put forth by the most deep thinking Christian smart guys who ever walked the face of the earth, if you aren't living a life of word and deed that is in line with God's design, then none of it is worth a thing.

And that's why my friend's question was so jarring, and so important. It reminded me that no matter how much fun it might be to think and learn about the many wonders of God and the Christian faith, it's just as important, if not more important to understand the many wonders of the Christian Church, it's meaning and it's purpose.

This is precisely why we have chosen "*Don't Just Go to Church, Be the Church*" as our worship theme for this fall. It is also the meaning and message behind the book of Hebrews from which we read this morning.

What does it mean to be the church? These 10 short verses are jam packed with description and definition of what it is that a church is and does. And these descriptions are offered to us in what can basically be broken down into 3 categories. Being the Church is loving your neighbor. Being the Church is loving your life. And finally, being the Church is loving God.

The importance of loving one's neighbor is borne out by the fact that the author of Hebrews chose to begin his sermon and spend nearly half of these 10 verses talking about how we treat others. "*Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.*" Hebrews 13: 1-2 "*Remember those who are in prison; and those who are ill-treated.*" And "*Let marriage be held in honor.*"

Understanding what it means to be the church finds it's beginning in the way that we treat others. Being the church means loving the person sitting next to you and across the aisle, even when they get on your nerves and especially when they disappoint you or hurt your feelings. Being the church means going out of your way to welcome and show kindness to visitors and newcomers, remembering that we all had a first visit to this congregation and that a kind word or generous gesture can make all the difference in the world to someone trying to find their way around a new place in the midst of a bunch of strangers.

Being the church means remembering those who are less fortunate than you. Those in prison, poor, homeless, immigrants, any and everyone that is misunderstood and ill-treated by the rest of our society should be able to expect nothing but love, acceptance, and understanding from the body of Christ.

And finally, *“let marriage be held in honor.”* In a day and a time when marriage can sometimes be demoted to an optional relationship that is thrown away at the first sign of discord or difficulty, the assertion to let marriage be held in honor is a powerful reminder that the commitment of two people to live together as one, for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, is both holy and emblematic of the sort of caring, self-sacrificing relationship that defines God’s will and design for human interaction in the Christian church.

Secondly, the writer of Hebrews insists that being the church is being happy with your life. He wrote God’s word saying, *“Keep your life free from love of money and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never fail you nor forsake you.”* Not just an encouragement toward financial stewardship, this insistence on keeping one’s life free from the love of money is a call to peace of mind and contentment of heart that can come only when one begins loving and appreciating what one has more than one whines and wishes about and for what one doesn’t have. It is a call to love one’s life and trust in God to provide all that we need as he reminds us, *“I will never fail you nor forsake you.”* And THAT is a promise that you can rely on.

Last, and certainly not least, the writer of Hebrews tells us that being the Church is loving God. The scripture reads, *“Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”* Hebrews 13: 15-16

There are a lot of big words in those few verses. *“Let us CONTINUALLY offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.”* Worship and sacrifice begin with the attitude of heart that is shown by the words that fill our mind and our mouth. First, we offer up the sacrifice with the fruit of our lips.

Being the church is spending time in prayer with God. Being the church is telling others about God's love and how totally awesome being in relationship with the creator of the universe can be. Being the church is like mother always said, "*not saying anything at all about someone, if you don't have anything good to say about them.*"

But then also, this sacrifice of love and praise to God extends beyond our words and into our action. Being the church is NEVER neglecting to do good. As much as some folks might like to suggest that the Christian life is defined by all of those "*Thou Shall Nots,*" that they love to define and toss around so frequently, this passage from Hebrews hammers home the reality that Christianity is not defined by not doing bad, but rather the Christian life, and the purpose of the Christian Church is marked and measured by doing good anywhere and everywhere that we possibly can. Being the church is going out of your way to be loving, generous and kind to everyone everywhere.

"Let us CONTINUALLY offer up a sacrifice of praise to God." ALL days, at ALL times, in ALL circumstances, being the church, being Christ-like, being the people that God has called us to be means that we will always and forever do everything within God's power to do, say and offer kindness to God and our neighbor, loving our life, and giving God thanks for the privilege.

It was Billy Sunday who said, "*Going to church doesn't any more make you a Christian than standing in a garage makes you a car.*" Don't just go to church, be the Church. May God bless us, and give us the strength. Amen.