

The sermon included in this edition of the newsletter was preached by Billy Wade on March 5, 2017, the first Sunday of Lent. The session has directed that it be sent to all members of the congregation. It can be heard by going to our website at www.fpccov.org and clicking on “Media” – “Sermons” – “March 5”.

The Session

Billy Wade
FPC Covington
March 5, 2017



John 15: 4-5
Ephesians 1:15 -23

Why Church?

We were eating on an outside patio of a restaurant, on Church Street, actually looking right across at the church where I grew up. It's changed a lot since then, as the city has changed, as it's grown up around the church. There are restaurants and high-rise condos, and the MARTA station.

As we watched there were people sitting on the benches in the church yard, and passing by on the sidewalks – a busy night life. It reminded me that churches were put up at crossroads in the midst of banks and businesses, courthouses and government buildings to make the statement that God is active in the world, and for the World, and calls us to be also. The gospel is good news for this life, not a retreat from it.

I remembered the church – this church – as a place I was baptized; where my parents brought me, knowing that they couldn't raise me and my sisters by themselves; knowing they needed help with such a frightening and wonderful responsibility, help not only from God but from others who would make holy promises to teach us about God's love, to remind us that no matter how far we wandered, we'd always be God's children. They took us there regularly, knowing that we couldn't get there on our own, and that it was too important for us to miss.

What they did wasn't only for us, but for them as well, because of the hunger in their own hearts, the thirst in their own souls. So, we learned in Sunday school the stories of Jesus and of God's people, and that we were part of that long line of witnesses. We sang the hymns, lyrics and melodies that still come back to me in my times of greatest distress and times of greatest joy.

The church is people, first of all, and not a building, But it is, for us, a holy place – or holy places, since I've been a part of a number of them. The church is a place where we meet some people we normally wouldn't have met, and might have had no desire to meet. We meet them because God called us there. The church isn't a voluntary association. It's a place where the walls and ceilings are saturated with the prayers of those who only by God's grace, and only together are saints. It's a place where we learn a different language – a language foreign to much of the world – the language of confession and forgiveness, redemption and resurrection; where we are fed the bread of life and offered the cup of salvation and from where we are sent out into the world every week with God's power and blessing. You see, it was not primarily some lone voice in my head, or coming from the sky, calling me into ministry. It came through the church, and was confirmed by the church, through the voice of others of God's children.

As I thought about my church, growing up, I thought of people who passed in and out of those doors. Of course, we all come and go eventually, one way or another. But for some, the things that rooted me never seemed to take root in them. For some, the ties did not bind, and they drifted away for one reason or another.

As a Pastor I have a passion to help bind people to the church – not as some duty or obligation; not as a matter of guilt; not as something we do to win God's favor. But because, as the Psalmist says, our souls “thirst for the Living God.” (Psalms 42:2); because we enter the house of the Lord “with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival (Psalms 42:4); because, as Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches... separated from me you can do nothing”.

It's a communal image. You see, to be attached to Jesus, is to be attached to others. To separate ourselves from God's people is to separate ourselves from him. Our discipleship isn't based on our race, our gender, or our heritage, not on our commonality of interests or hobbies or our shared views of politics or ideology, but rather on our common connection to Jesus Christ.

That doesn't mean it's always easy. This vine imagery can call to mind all kinds of entanglements. But as one of you told this congregation a couple of years ago during stewardship season, "I'm not Christian without you". Jesus didn't just do individual spiritual mentoring; he called disciples into a new community, which is a great blessing. It's different from every other organization, but it is an organization. People of course are always coming in and out of a particular church. Work, life, take people to other places. Sickness, disability keep some from joining in certain parts of the church's life and fellowship. We've lost so many wonderful, gifted people through the years. God continually sends us out to do new work.

But, too, some people leave because they're angry – angry at God or at the denomination. Or they leave because they're angry at somebody in the congregation. They leave with hurt feelings. It's not easy trying to live out our faith together. Some people leave because they look around and no longer see their best friends, or because they never really bonded with those here with them. For some, it's a change of priorities in their lives. Some just seem to get out of the habit and drift away. Some never say why they have left and I'm not always sure they could articulate it.

Statistics show that most people who leave Presbyterian churches don't end up going to any church. And that, I believe is the saddest part of all. Calvin and Luther said, there was no "ordinary" salvation outside the church. Which means, it's extraordinary if we can really live a life of faith outside the church. Of course, God's Church, "the holy catholic" or "universal church" as we say in the creed, is much larger than any individual church or denomination – or even religion. Jesus said, "I have other sheep who are not of this fold" (John 10:16). Jesus is active outside this church – any church.

People say sometimes, "I'm spiritual, I'm just not religious." Now our personal spirituality is important, but some people sometimes seem to take a little of this and a little of that, and make it whatever they want it to be. It's within a fellowship of believers that we study the WORD and we act as checks and balances to our individual interpretations. Otherwise God's voice can begin to sound a whole lot like our own.

The thing is, without others of the body of Christ, we tend to make up our own religion. Oh, we still do that when part of a fellowship of believers, it's just harder. I can worship God on a mountain trail or on the beach by myself – and I do, but not for long. Jesus said, "Where 2 or 3 are gathered, there I am in the midst of you". When Paul and the first disciples went out to proclaim the Gospel, they started churches. Paul called them Christ's body in the world.

Now, some folks will say, "I have my church: my friends, my family." Well, maybe, but the church is where the Word is regularly read and studied, where the sacraments are shared and holy promises are made, where prayers are regularly lifted up with and for one another. It's where we worship with others. It's God's people, God's Church. Corporate worship is at the very heart of our faith – always has been. As the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* says, "Worship is the principal influence that shapes our faith and the most visible way we express our faith." It's the most distinctive act of faith. It's where we're reminded that our chief end, our highest priority, is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever" (*The Shorter Catechism*, answer 1). Which means not so much what we do, but what we open ourselves to God doing in us and for us.

We're entering the season of Lent. Traditionally, for Christians, Lent has been a time for preparation and discernment, a time for discipline (not often one of our favorite words), for spiritual practices that will move us closer to God and God's people. It's a time for seeking God's help in giving up some things: bad habits, lazy discipleship, attitudes that are less than loving. It's a time for giving up the idea that we can live life on our own, in our own way. It's also a season to practice the discipline of taking on things: prayer, meditation, service, the reading of God's word and worship – things we've neglected.

It's a time for seeking to give ourselves more to the One who has given himself first to us. He is the vine through whom we are connected to God and to one another, so that we may bear fruit, becoming more and more, the ones God intends us to be.

