

“Long Story Short - Church”

Scripture: Acts 2, John 20

Graphics: puzzle, Jesus, Pentecost, fire, tongues, identity and influence

Big Truth: The Bible tell us the grand story of God’s redemptive plan for the world. Though Creation, the Fall, Israel, Jesus, the Church, and New Creation, the Bible is sufficient for our salvation. Every person who comes to Panama UMC is called to love God, self, others and the entire creation because God created the universe complete, purposeful, from and for community.

Focus phrase: The church is not a building, but a people whose identity and influence are in Christ.

1. Introduction

- A. We’ve all read the stories. The headlines go something like this: “Tornado rips through town, destroys multiple buildings.” And in the details of the article is usually a picture of the flattened historic church building that’s been part of the community for 200 years. Thankfully, no one was hurt. But on the following Sunday, the church gathers outside the former building to worship like never before!
- B. In the same way, many churches have, as part of their history - even our church - a devastating fire that caused enough damage to the church building that worship and mission had to be moved outside the walls of the church until a plan could be formed. Yet, the report from post-fire churches is that they often continue to meet and even thrive in their community.
- C. We also know that every year thousands of churches close their doors in communities across the nation and world for many reasons. You’ll hear things like: “Well, church just isn’t what it used to be. Things have changed. People have changed. We’ve kind of ‘moved on’ as a society. Churches have lots of problems, bad leadership, lack of focus, and too many hypocrites.” Maybe you have your own additions to my list of complaints about the church. From moral scandals to money problems and power struggles, the church often makes headlines for all the wrong reasons.
- D. Destroyed and closed church buildings are certainly sad, without a doubt. They represent for us something tangible...something about coming to a place where we worship and serve and live life together.
- E. Over the past 3 months, we’ve been asked to essentially close down our church buildings. We’ve done that for safety reasons, to follow the guidance of the authorities over us, and to care for our congregation as well as our community. We’ve done that because we don’t want be the place where people get sick during this pandemic.
- F. But if we think for one second that the CHURCH has closed, then we’re not paying attention to what’s been going on.

- G. Over the past 12 weeks, the church has made many changes. Most of all, we've missed YOU! We've moved our worship services, Bible studies, meetings, prayer gatherings, and discipleship groups online. We've seen steady growth in the number of people engaging in those online platforms and we are thankful. We've seen people grow in faith, come to Christ, and do things they've never done before to care for others right where they are!
- H. Destroyed church buildings, closed church buildings, and every other church building have one thing in common...but it may not be what you think. Every church building ever built, destroyed, or closed is **JUST a building. It IS NOT the Church.**
- I. On this Pentecost Sunday 2020, as we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church in the first century, here's the point: **The CHURCH is not a building. The church is a PEOPLE that have been transformed by the grace and truth of Jesus Christ...**a people that find their identity, not in a building, but in Jesus. A people who have influence, not because of a building, but because of Jesus.
- J. When we're baptized, we're not baptized into a building. We are baptized into a people! A people of God! The building may close for good or temporarily, but, "...the Lord will build the Church and not even the gates of hell will prevail against it!"
- K. As we continue in our grand sweep of making the "long story" of the Bible "short", we find the origins of a movement of Jesus' church that was filled with martyrs and revolutionaries. This is a stark contrast to many of our understandings of church; where instead of a "movement" we think of a "meeting" and instead of a "people" we think of a "place."
- L. In the Bible, **"Church" is not a destination**; it's people gathering in preparation to go and turn the world upside down for Jesus... or better yet, "right side up!"
- M. So far, we've seen how our world **needs** this revolution even as we've studied the big-picture of the story of the Bible. If you missed an "episode" of this series, let me catch you up. [BIBLE] The entire story of these 66 books of the Bible can be summarized this way: It started with Creation, then The Fall, the nation of Israel, Jesus, the Church, and the coming New Creation.
- N. We looked at the life of Jesus last week, and we'll look at the "New Creation" God has planned for the world next week.
- O. Now, WE are a major player in this story. God wants to pull us out of the audience and insert each of us into this drama. The bridge from God's activity through Jesus to the New Creation that's to come is **US – the CHURCH!**

- P. Let's PRAY and then dive into the birth and purpose of the people called The Church!
- Q. PRAY!
- R. The question we're answering today is: **Why do I, as a Christ-follower, need to be a part of the Church?**

2. Scripture

- A. In the New Testament, the Greek word "Ekklesia" means church. But it never - not once - refers to a building or a structure. It ALWAYS refers to a **gathering of people**.
- B. In Jesus' day, for the culture at large, **ekklesia meant a public assembly of people**. When the military gathered, they called it an ekklesia. When politicians gathered, they called it an ekklesia.
- C. Ekklesia didn't refer to a specific place, but a **specific purpose**. Jesus builds on this idea when he names his people as the ekklesia. **We're a people called out by Jesus for a purpose**.
- D. All the references to the church in the Bible refer to God's people that are called together to form a new community that's distinct in their love for God, for one another, and for the world. The great theologian N.T. Wright said, "The early church was known for their love for each other and the love for the poor and marginalized."
- E. It wasn't until AD 313 that the first church buildings came into existence. There's nothing wrong with buildings - and ours is as beautiful as it is functional for mission and outreach - but when we read the Bible we see that they were **never the focal point of disciples of Jesus**. For the first 300 years of the movement of Jesus' people, most meetings were held in secret because proclaiming Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar could get you killed.
- F. That all changed when the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian. Suddenly, being a follower of Jesus was socially-acceptable and not a bad way to gain favor with those in power. Not only did the wealthy build ornate buildings for worship, but gatherings grew more formal with increasing "imperial protocol" and pageantry where people came to observe an event instead of enrolling in an uprising of grace.
- G. This has been a struggle throughout the last two thousand years, ever since that first Pentecost Day. Yet thanks to courageous reformers, Jesus' words to the apostle Peter remain true: "He will build his church (his gathered people - the ekklesia of God) and nothing will prevail against it!"
- H. So what was it that happened on that first Pentecost Day 2,000 years ago, after Jesus was resurrected, that changed everything so radically? Before the Pana-

ma UMC was established...before the Anglican Church and Roman Catholic churches...before the Reformation of 1538 or the edicts of Emperor Constantine in 313...before the creeds and the councils of the early days...WHAT HAPPENED when the church was born and what did it mean? And, what are WE supposed to do about it today as The Church?

- I. Well, very simply, this all has to do with **the presence of the Holy Spirit**.
- J. Before Jesus ascended back to heaven after he walked out of his own grave under his own power on Easter, there was a scene in John 20:19-22 where Jesus' filled the first disciples with the Holy Spirit.
 - i. "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."
 - ii. So not long after Jesus was raised from the dead, he did exactly had He had promised...he gave the disciples the Holy Spirit...the Comforter and Guide.
 - iii. It was after that very moment that the disciples knew WHO they were and WHAT they were to do.
 - iv. But the new ekklesia needed more than just a few scared disciples, even if they did know WHO they were and WHAT they were to do. So God's plan for the church expanded...
- K. Turn with me in your Bibles to Acts chapter 2. Let's read a little of what happened 50 days after Easter - on the first Pentecost Sunday, which we're celebrating today...and what it means for the people called The Church. Acts 2, starting in verse 1.
 - i. *"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."* Acts 2:1-4
 - ii. God's expanded plan for the Church - His ekklesia - didn't just include the disciples and the closest followers of Jesus. God's plan was unleashed on the world, through that crowd - the ekklesia - gathered in that courtyard in Jerusalem that day.
- L. And after THAT day, EVERYTHING changed. The God who created everything to be good and complete and with purpose was once again making every-

thing right again for the sinful world. The story of Israel, fulfilled and completed in Jesus, was now ready to be lived out in a group of people from different places and times...through you and me!

- M. God's PLAN A was for His message of salvation, forgiveness, hope, and love in Jesus to be carried to the world from the epicenter of Jerusalem, to the ends of the earth.
- N. In Matthew 28:19-20, we have this famous commission: Jesus said, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"
- O. The ironic thing about it all is that as soon as Jesus SAID that, he left! Poof! Gone! BUT...as we know from his appearance to the disciples...and to the ekklesia gathered on Pentecost, Jesus' presence with the church - and with US - comes in the **form of the Holy Spirit that LIVES in each person** that puts their faith and trust in Jesus for salvation and mission.

3. Application

- A. The Church is not the CHURCH without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. Without the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we may have a gathering of people that we call church. We may have great buildings and ministries that we call church. We may even be doing helpful and needed things for our community.
- B. But the Church of Jesus Christ is not the ekklesia of God unless we invite and work with the almighty and awesome presence and power of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ!
- C. **There is NO CHURCH apart from the Holy Spirit.** And as a follower of Jesus, being part of the church means inviting and working with the power of the Holy Spirit.
- D. And when each follower of Jesus is filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, two things become realities in your life THROUGH the Church - the people of God filled with the Holy Spirit:
- E. First, only through The Church and the presence of the HOLY Spirit will I find my true **identity** in Christ.
 - i. Identity comes when you know who you are...not who other people SAY you are. True Christian identity has nothing to do with what you DO or DON'T DO, where or how you grew up, how much money you make, or even how many times a month you come to church building. If that were the case right now, then only a handful of us would be Christians.

- ii. Just because you can't come to the building right now doesn't cancel your status as a follower of Jesus Christ does it? No!
 - iii. Having a place to come practice our faith is important so that we'll learn and grow for the mission, but this isn't CHURCH. **You and I are the church!**
 - iv. Your identity doesn't come from a building, but from a relationship with the One who died and rose again so that you would BELONG to Him.
 - v. And your identity in Christ starts at your baptism and continues on forever in Him.
 - vi. When you're baptized, you publicly announce that you are receiving the full rights of a citizen of heaven because of Jesus' sacrifice your sins. Those sins are washed away and you're made free in Jesus.
 - vii. Those waters of baptism mark you as person of the ekklesia. Those waters of baptism don't make you a member of a building...but of a people!
 - viii. And you, and all other members of the ekklesia of God, are members of the kingdom of God, which is the realm in which the people of God live now in certain hope of the eternal future, secure in Jesus.
 - ix. The church isn't a museum for righteous people...it's a hospital for sinners. We come here to find healing and hope, to find our identity in Christ, and to get equipped for mission, **BUT THEN we go out into the world, like we are now**, to influence the world for Jesus.
- F. Which leads us to the second reason for being part of the people called the church. The first is that through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, we get our identity through the Church.
- G. Secondly, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, I find my true **influence** in Christ.
- i. Jesus' commission in Matthew 28 not only said that the people that make up the ekklesia of God should be baptized as an identity in Christ, but we're to GO, teach and baptize others. You and I have work to DO!!!
 - ii. Jesus calls us to influence the world for Him, by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. After that first day of Pentecost, the disciples and all who were transformed by what they'd seen and experienced began a revolution that has reached the entire planet.
 - iii. Being a part of the church means that you are to influence the world for Christ, with the other people in the church. The apostle Paul likens us to a body in 1 Corinthians. Here's what he wrote:
 - iv. *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good... For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit*

we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” 1 Corinthians 12:7, 12-13 (NRSV)

- v. This is a powerful description of what it means when we gather in Jesus’ name and for his purposes. Discovering our identity is not the only reason we need one another and “the church”. We also need to find our true influence for Christ, or, as Paul describes, our spiritual gifts that are a part of the body of Christ.
- vi. Each one of us has at least one spiritual gift that you’re to you to glorify God and build up the church. And building up the church doesn’t mean building up the building, although some do. For most of us, building up the church means building the body of Christ - adding to our numbers, training and teaching, serving and loving, sharing your faith with others in every way you can.
- vii. Last I checked, you’re still doing that, even though you haven’t stepped foot in the church building in 3 months. THAT is the church influencing the world, apart from the church building. Sometimes, launching out from here is helpful, but the actual influence happens right where you are...and all around you.

4. Conclusion

- A. I love Pentecost! I love the church! I love the Holy Spirit! I get fired up when the people of the ekklesia of God are filled with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and things start to light on fire...lives get changed, people are empowered to love God and others like never before...worship erupts from our hearts...and transformation happens!
- B. As the song goes, “I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together, all who follow Jesus, all around the world, we are the church together!”
- C. We are God’s Plan A for the salvation of the world from now until Jesus returns and God unfolds the New Creation, which we’ll talk about next week.
- D. Grab onto your identity in Christ this week. Increase your influence for Christ this week. You are the Church, church! You are Pentecost people - alive in the Spirit and ready to change the world in Jesus’ name!
- E. The building may be closed right now, and that’ll start changing soon, but never before has the church had the opportunity to be deployed everywhere you are so that every family and person in our community has the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus! In some ways, I hope we never go back to ever thinking the church building is who we are or what we do...the future may look a lot more like those first 300 years of the church than the last 1700.
- F. Let BE and DO it all in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit! Let’s pray...