

I. Intro.

A. When people ask me, how's the church? I sometimes ask them: what do you want to hear? Which story do you want me to tell? I can talk for a long time about things that are fun, encouraging and all true.

1. I can tell you stories about small groups where people have knitted their lives together in life-giving ways – where they are celebrating each other's wins and picking each other up when someone gets knocked down.
2. I can tell you stories about people who are coming to faith and growing.
3. I can tell you stories of people who are serving in quiet, sacrificial ways – using their gifts to care for others.
4. I can tell you stories about people serving in formal inside-the-wall operations that has them: working with kids or serving in tech or leading worship or making coffee).
5. I can tell you stories about people serving in formal outside-the-walls programs (distributing food to the under-resourced, staffing the Justice Center, volunteering on a Matthew Homes construction site or helping single Moms via the HOGs ministry).
6. And I can tell you stories about people serving in informal ways – about people just helping others.

B. I can tell you some great stories – all true. And I can tell you a lot of things that are disappointing and unsettling, and also all true.

1. Over the last few years, the global church, the US church, the wider evangelical church have done plenty to disappoint. As has this church. As have you and me. I can tell you stories about our failures and misses. About people not growing. About people missing opportunities to serve others.
2. In my prep work for Advent messages this past year, I was reading about the incarnation. The extreme humiliation of Jesus in showing up as one of us – the Creator becoming part of the Creation, and then climbing further down the ladder. He was not just one of us, but a slave, and not just a slave, but a slave who went to his death. And not just death, but death on the cross.
 - a) Philippians 2:5 – the passage I am alluding to here – makes it clear that no one started higher than Jesus, and no one goes lower.
3. The suggestion was that the incarnation was the penultimate act of humiliation. That means, not the premier, not the climax, not the ultimate act of humiliation, but the second-place finisher. The silver medalist. Which, of course, immediately leaves you asking: what is ultimate? If the incarnation is not the ultimate, what is? In what ways did Jesus humiliate himself more than in setting aside his glory, becoming a person, then a slave, then a slave who went to his death on the cross?
4. The answer, according to this writer, was to associate himself with the church (his church).
5. Ouch!

C. Let me pause here to say, I know the church – both the Big C church and this particular congregation - pretty well.

1. I've been a pastor in one form or another for over thirty-five years, and on staff at this church for twenty-two.

2. And I have preached through the book of Acts – the book written by Luke to describe the first thirty years of the church, its formation and organization – two times. One of the key places we go to in the Bible when we want to ask questions about what the church is and what is supposed to be and do, is the book of Acts. I have preached through it two times. (Once as a college pastor in Washington. And a second time – a two-year expositional series – here).

3. On top of that, I've easily read twenty-five books and two thousand articles about the church.

4. And I've spent over 92,000 hours in church meetings – and that was just last month.

D. If you've made the mistake of asking me something specific about this church, like: what time will the bus get back from the Middle School retreat or ??????. You will realize that what I don't know about the church in those kind of practical and specific ways is just about everything. But if you try to surprise me with insider information about the church, especially the church's failures, you will find that I am pretty dialed in.

E. And that is what led me to ask again:

1. How can we do better?

2. What are we supposed to be doing, and how do we do this better?

3. It led me again to the Book of Acts.

II. As everyone knows, even those who have been living under the proverbial rock, these last two years have been different.

A. A lot has gone wrong. Last week I cited an Andrew Sullivan quote in my Friday Update. He wrote:

1. Create a throw-away consumeristic civilization, break families into ever smaller units, add a tech revolution, online addiction, economic precariousness, breakneck social change, endless work, and the collapse of religion and meaning, and yes, people will go a bit nuts. They'll become depressed; they'll seek out escapes through opiates or meth; they'll disappear down rabbit holes of online fanaticism; they'll seek meaning through work or fame; they'll tear each other down with glee; they'll lose the skills for family, friendship, constancy, discipline, and love."

B. I think a lot of what he says there – and the corresponding reasons for alarm – are true. I also think a lot of things have gone right. We are collectively coming through these two years in much better shape than I would have guessed we would be. And the challenges have been wake up calls, exposing problems and providing us with unique opportunities to grow.

1. They have helped us see some areas where we need to rethink and regroup.

C. And so today we are beginning a six-week series on the church based mostly on some key passages in the Book of Acts.

1. It connects us back to the Renewal series we began in the fall, when we started with Romans 12 – in particular, Romans 12:2, that calls on us “not to be conformed to the patterns of this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are able to test and approve God’s will – His good, pleasing and perfect will.

D. We started with this passage in the fall, exploring personal renewal. We started by thinking about who we are.

1. I argued that among the many ways we could think about who we are, we need to anchor our identity in four big ideas. Four truths from Scripture:

a) *Gen. 1 drove home the idea that we are highly valued – having been made in the Image of God*

b) *Gen. 3 drove home the idea that we are deeply fallen because of sin.*

c) *We then looked at John 3 and noted that we are greatly loved;*

d) *And finally, we turned to Matthew 6 to note that we are Eternity-Shaped.*

2. Then, with that as a basis, we looked at steps we needed to take to be shaped by God – and those four ideas grew out of Mark 12 – the call to love God with our Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength.

E. Today we take up part two of this Renewal Project. The question before us is, what would it take to renew the church?

III. As we get started, it occurs to me that there are a lot of things we might explore, for instance:

A. Renewing the church remains a personal renewal project. We are, after all, the church. It’s not a building.

B. We could note that the church has always been in need of renewal.

1. One of the things that sounds way more spiritual than it is, comes from those who say they just want to get back to the first century church. When I hear this I always want to say, “OK, Acts 2 – yes. Sign me up for that. And Acts 4 as well, where everyone shared everything in common. I think that only worked for a few weeks, but yes, we need more of that.”

2. But for the most part, you only say you want to be part of a New Testament church if you haven’t read the New Testament. It was a mess.

a) About a month ago, a young mom told me she thought their family life was out of control. I asked what her husband thought, and she said, “He says we’re doing fine and that I just need to watch some Jerry Springer.”

b) I feel that way about today’s church. As disappointing as today’s church can be – all our misses – all we need to do is read the New Testament to see a church that is really a mess.

3. The ideas that are shared and the ideals we are called to are always better in theory than in practice, because – well, messed up people, like you and me – get involved. If you find a perfect church, do not mess it up by joining it.

C. There are a lot of things I might say, about renewing the church. But the plan is to use the next six weeks to turn to the Book of Acts, framing things around community - the missional community, the call to community, the sacramental community, the sacrificing community, the equipping community and the unified community.

D. As I hope you picked up, a big part of the push is for community. Doing life with others – having good friends who are committed to you and your relationship with God.

1. This focus is not new for us. When it comes to small groups I have pushed, prodded, pleaded, scolded and otherwise cajoled you about our need to do life with others.
2. I have preached about and written about:
 - a) *our need for 2 AM friends.*
 - b) Our need for people who know us well and love us anyway.
 - c) Our need for a group with whom we can practice the “one anothers” that get spelled out in the New Testament – to love one another, serve one another, forgive one another, live at peace with each other, accept one another, greet one another, instruct one another.
3. *There are 59 one anothers in the New Testament.*
4. Some of this happens - but not enough, and certainly not on the scale our country and culture need.

IV. So, this focus on renewal will be framed around community. Today I want to set it up by establishing four basic – by restating four important, but fairly basic – observations about the church.

A. The first is, the church is God’s plan. It’s his idea. The church is Jesus’s Project.

1. The first time we see the word “church” is in Matthew 16.
 - a) It is a famous passage. It immediately follows Peter’s Confession. Jesus says, “who do people say I am?” They respond, “Some say you are John the Baptist. Some say you are Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.” Who do you say I am? And Peter declares: you are the Christ. You are the Messiah, the promised one, the one we’ve been waiting for.
 - b) It is here, immediately following this statement by Peter, that Jesus announces that he is starting a movement – launching a missional community that is going to overtake the world. It is going to defeat evil and help establish his kingdom.
 - c) And in doing that He co-opts an obscure Greek political term: *ekklesia*. At that exact moment it was a political term that described a movement. It will later come to be translated as “the assembly of those called out,” or as “the congregation.”
 - (1) The church will eventually be referred to in all kinds of other ways. In the New Testament we will see it referred to as: the family of God, the bride of Christ, the Way, and other things.
 - (2) In modern days, it is described as: a movement, a religion, a hospital, a battle ship, an aircraft carrier.

2. Later, in Acts 1, Jesus will describe the church's trajectory, telling his disciples that they will "be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the utter most parts of the world" – which is what happened.
 3. If you read through the Book, it is clear that the church is God's plan. It is not our plan (our idea). But it is His.
 4. However... but.... before we go to Acts, let's note that to any sane person, this statement by Jesus had to sound like nonsense.
 - a) I started working on this sermon last year while I was in Portland for a meeting. I was sitting in a fairly crowded Starbucks close to a homeless man who got my attention because he couldn't open the bag of chips he had bought because he had gloves on. He refused to take them off because - he explained to no one in particular – that he wasn't going to leave his DNA where "they" could find it.
 - b) He then looked at the guy sitting very close to me and said, "I know you. You were in Little Rascals." And the man – who I am pretty sure was not in Little Rascals, but I never watched it, so I suppose there is a .01 percent chance he had. He went along with it. He said, "yeah I was."
 - c) Their conversation went on for about ten minutes. The homeless man said he used to be a professor at UCLA but Hollywood kept stealing his screen plays, so he left.
 - d) Look, I am 99.9% sure he was mentally ill. I suppose he might have been telling the truth. It is possible. But I'm pretty sure he was troubled, confused, profoundly misguided.
 5. And at that moment it occurred to me that had I overheard Jesus talking about starting the church, I might have thought the same thing.
 6. Had I heard him say that he was going to start something and it was going to be the biggest thing ever. It was going to overrun Rome's Empire, it was going to outwit the Greek philosophers, that it was going to stand against the power of evil – and that he had no money and only a few very unimpressive followers, I would have thought he was crazy as well.
 - a) The men Jesus had gathered around him did not look like those you would need to change the world.
 - b) Had Jesus set out to raise startup capital from the VC crowd, he would not have gotten much money.
 7. And yet, what Jesus started took hold. And it spread. And, as I have noted many times before, Christ's church is now the oldest, largest, the most geographically disbursed and ethnically diverse organization in the world.
 8. So, the church is God's idea. He owns it. He started it and he defines it. We do not get to decide what it is or what it is for.
- B. Point Two: It had a very successful launch
1. One of the most significant moments in history happened in an upper room in Jerusalem. It's the event we call Pentecost because it happened on Pentecost, which was the Jewish holiday held fifty days after the Passover.

2. The specific Pentecost I am referring to when I say, “It is one of the most significant moments in history,” happened on the Pentecost right after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension.

a) Just before going to Heaven Jesus had commissioned his followers – given them their marching orders. This is Matthew 28:18-20, where he tells them: **“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”**

b) He had also instructed them to go to Jerusalem and wait.

3. And that is the backdrop for what we read about in Acts 2. The chapter opens:

a) **When the Feast of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Without warning there was a sound like a strong wind, gale force—no one could tell where it came from. It filled the whole building. Then, like a wildfire, the Holy Spirit spread through their ranks, and they started speaking in a number of different languages as the Spirit prompted them.**

4. Later in the chapter, starting with verse 42, we read:

a) **They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

5. There are all kinds of things we might make note of, such as the four aspects of the church.

a) They gathered for fellowship, for instruction in the Bible, for the breaking of Bread (the sacraments) and for prayer.

b) These are the minimum requirements.

6. As I noted, we study the book of Acts for insight about how the church should be structured and governed and funded. But for now, notice that it had a good start.

7. If you are looking to learn how to do a good product launch, you could do a lot worse to study the start of the church, because it was an amazing – indeed a supernatural – product launch.

C. Point number three: the church is on a roll.

1. Point number one: the church is God’s idea; point number two: it got off to a great start; point number three: it’s on a good roll.

2. You are to be forgiven if you are thinking otherwise – as I noted earlier – in this country it's been a rough season. Not just COVID.
3. The church in the West has been declining for some time.
4. But Christianity is a global movement and we should note, in some ways, those of us living in the West are around the church where it is the weakest. In other parts of the world, it is exploding:
5. For over twenty years I have served on the board of Scholar Leaders International. When the group was started, we were bringing people to the US for PhD studies.
 - a) Idea was for every 100 new Christians,
 - b) For every 1,000 you needed
 - c) For every 100,000 you needed
6. I reconnected with Christ Church via this group
7. We have few studying at Trinity today because.
8. I remember during the late 90s,
9. .

D. Number Four: The Church of Jesus Christ will win.

1. The church is God's idea. It got off to a good start. It is on a roll. And it will win.
2. Perhaps the better way to say this is, God will win, using – among other things - His church.
3. Let me be pause to note, things may get much darker between now and then. It's certainly been darker in the past. I do not see any reason why it might not go that way again. But, history is not aimless, nor is it circular. It had a beginning and there will be an ending – a culmination. And God wins, good prevails, Jesus will triumph. Every knee will bow and tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.
4. The specifics about how and when is the source unending speculation. I am not going there other than to say: it is certain.
5. And you do not want to miss out.
6. I sometimes hear people talk about their regrets around lost opportunity: the job they didn't take, the stock they didn't buy.
 - a) Those regrets can be real. But they will not be regrets you carry into eternity. The failure to invest that will lead to regret will be the failure to love, to serve, to give, to participate in the Kingdom of God.
 - b) Men and women, you will live forever. Invest in forever. Invest in the Kingdom of God. And that means, helping grow his church.

V. There are other things that might be said about the church and church renewal. For instance:

- A. We need it to prevail.
 1. A few weeks ago I wrote about Malik's observation about seven institutions that are shaping the world.

B. We could also make note of the fact that the church is messy. Membership in a local church means joining your imperfect self to many other imperfect selves to form an imperfect community.

VI. But one step at a time. You have decisions to make. Renewal is work. You have to sign up for that. It doesn't happen by accident.

VII. I want to invite you to join with me in a quest for a better church. I want one. I believe the world needs one. And I believe it will honor God.