

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse  
Sunday, July 21, 2024

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## **Theology 101: The Church**

### **Acts 2:37-47**

*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him." And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

*Awe came upon everyone because many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*

Beloved, I have found that grief thrusts an unyielding kind of honesty upon you, as you stumble along, trying to learn how to live again. I don't pick up the phone anymore when I don't feel like talking and I no longer feel bad about it. I don't laugh to make folks feel comfortable anymore, and that makes me comfortable. I don't passively agree with religious cliches that make us feel better about the indescribable nature of loss and the utter sovereignty and mystery of God. And, I now feel comfortable telling David what I am and am not willing to preach on.

When looking at the sermon series for this summer, I made clear to David that I would like to preach on the Church, he and Mary and Courtney, and Steve can do the heavy lifting. They can wax eloquently on sanctification and justification, predestination and providence. But as for me, I would happily take on the Church.

I have what my professors in seminary would call a high ecclesiology. In case you've never heard that word, it's the formal academic way in which we refer to our theological view of the

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Church. Church with the big “C”, not just the local expression of the church, but the Universal Church.

It is based on the Greek word, *ekklēsia*, meaning “called out”; it's where we get the two major functions of the church in the Reformed tradition. “Called out”: The Church, as a group of people called by God, people that God calls together, not a select gathering of like-minded, socio-economically similar, geographically bound, politically aligned people, but a people who are called by God; called by God together to share in a life that follows after Christ. That is the first function of the *ekklēsia*. But it doesn't just stop there, the *ekklēsia*, the church, is also a group of people who have been called together by God to be sent out into the world, to witness to the great claim of God upon our whole lives, inviting others to experience the endless grace of God, and to point to the transforming love of God in Christ Jesus. The *ekklēsia*, the church. To sum it all up paraphrasing Shirley Guthrie, “The Church is a people, a people called out and called together.”

Now, if those are the two main functions of the Church, at least in our Reformed tradition. Then where in the world did all of these fancy buildings come from? Indeed, even our text this morning has precious little to say about the church as a physical structure. We overhear Peter inviting those gathered to repent and be baptized. We hear the admonishment to set ourselves apart, to respond to God's choosing of us, and be saved from this corrupt generation. We are drawn into imagining the many wonders, signs, and miracles the apostles are working in the midst of this early congregation of the Church. We even glimpse the new way of life together instituted by the holding of goods in common and the meeting of the needs of those who share in that particular congregation. And we are told that this is all unfolding as God is adding to this early Church day by day.

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Beloved, what we are not told, is that all of this is exclusively happening within the four walls of a sacred space. To be sure, Luke in his accounting of these Acts of the Apostles, includes that much time was spent together in the Temple. But the site of the Temple was only one setting in which church took place.

And Beloved, we ought not rush past this detail, for it is instructive for us some 2000 years later during our season as stewards of the church which God has called into being. The church building is only one setting in which the work, the rhythm, the power, the promise, the possibility of the church takes place. It feels like a good time to tag in Shirley Guthrie again because he captures it perfectly when he says this of the tension between the church and the church building. “If the church is wherever and whenever Christians come together for worship, study, and service in the name of Christ, do they not just as surely ‘go to church’ when they meet downtown during their lunch hour, when they join together in service projects away from the church building, when they meet for prayer and study in someone’s house?”

Indeed were not these earliest church members going to church when they were at the Temple, but also as they broke bread together in their homes? Were they not at church when they took the risk of faith, sold all they had, and tended to the needs of their neighbors? Were they not going to church when they prayed, and sang, and loved, and lived in and through every mundane and quotidian moment of their days?

I’ve got to linger on this point Beloved, for there is a risk here, a risk that our Reformed tradition and this text urges us to avoid, and that is the risk of conflating the Church with the building in which we gather or the staff that serve or the prestige that we accumulate as a congregation. If we conflat the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ with these things then we run the

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risk of constraining the claim of God upon our lives to the few hours we spend within these four walls of brick and mortar, and conveniently ignore the fact that God's claim upon our lives extends beyond the hour of worship we share, the 20 minutes of fellowship we engage in following service, the hour or so of formation, the few hours of committee meetings each week, and the well curated selection of socio-economically similar lives that populate this corner of God's kingdom.

Four walls alone are not the church. And I know that is an uncomfortable thing to sit with, because for the last few weeks, since we moved worship into this space, I've been asking some of you how you feel about worshipping in the gym. And it seems the consensus is that though it's a nice change of scenery, it's really only being tolerated, it's a necessary inconvenience until we get back into the sanctuary. That this is nice and all but don't get any ideas about making this setting for worship permanent. And I get it.

The four walls of our beautiful, magnificent, august, awe-inspiring, and imposing sanctuary brings a kind of comfort that escapes words. The pews and the cushions, the wood panels and stone features draw you, whether you want to be or not, they draw you in and open you up to encounter God afresh. I get it, those walls are home. They possess a kind of sacredness in their own right. I get it. In those walls this presbytery voted to move me to the final stage of my ordination process. In those walls I was ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament. In these walls I married my Beloved. And in these walls I laid her to rest. I get it.

Those four walls are the Idlewild Presbyterian Church in the City of Memphis. And, they are mere brick and mortar. A poor, even dingy approximation of what God's church is truly like. We are only ever approximating the kingdom of God, and that, that reality causes some tension.

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I believe the tension here, on which this text turns is in the tension that exists between Matthew's Gospel and Luke's accounting of the Apostles Acts. In Matthew's Gospel, Christ paused a dialogue with the disciple to look at Peter and say, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." And in Acts, Luke records that Peter is the one preaching and it's Peter who calls those who are gathered to repent, believe the Good News, and be baptized.

The tension here is that Peter seems to be the one giving main character energy, and if we believe the text, we might even believe that Peter is the reason the Church comes to existence in the first place. The tension here is that we might come to believe that this 3000 member congregation that Peter plants in Jerusalem is a product of Peter's power and preaching acumen. It's kind of how a church with a charismatic well-loved pastor will begin to over identify with the pastor and the church and not with their relationship to Jesus Christ.

What is important here is not that Peter is doing the preaching, it's the confession in Matthew that proceeds the preaching in Acts that makes all the difference. Because before Christ turns to him in Matthew and says, "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church", Peter confesses, "Thou art the Messiah, Son of the Living God." That is what is at the heart of the Church beloved, not the preacher, not the elders, not the deacons and all those who serve, they are crucial but not central. Not the building, not the branding, not the programs, they are crucial but not central. At the heart of the Church is our collective confession as we turn to see Jesus walking alongside us, and alongside our neighbors "Thou art the Messiah, Son of the Living God."

Yes we have these four walls, but they are not here that we might marvel at them in their own grandeur and beauty. We have these four walls to remind us that all of our efforts are endless

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strivings, striving to reflect in our world, that which God hopes for and has prepared for us in the world that is to come. For as beautiful as Idlewild is, it is shabby compared to what God has built in the Church Triumphant where all the saints of the ages now rest from their labors and glorify God together. For as humble and quaint the storefront church I grew up in on the corner of Quincy and Stuyvesant Streets in New York was, it was never so lowly as to capture the full measure of love and sacrifice Christ displayed in giving his life for us.

These buildings, our programs, our structures, our systems of governance, are all mere attempts at trying to reflect the love of God. And if our idea of Church is trapped in these four walls, then what is left for this world to which we have been called?

Perhaps Beloved, perhaps, this Summer as we worship in the gym, we are being invited to remember our identity as a congregation. Not at the shining building on the hill at 1750 Union, but to recover our vocational identity as children of God and followers of Christ, who have been compelled to reorder our lives together after the way of Christ, and in doing so participate in the reordering of this world after the kingdom of God.

We practice this reordering each Sunday as we gather for worship in this building. We practice this reordering as that early congregation of the church did as it devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread in communion, and to the lifting of prayers.

You practice this reordering of your lives during every session of the Tapestry and on Woven Together Wednesdays as we break bread together and study together. That is what you practice in your supper clubs and book clubs in the experiences shared in Presbyterian Women. That is what you practice for when you decide to take trips with one another, or grab lunch

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following worship. That is what you practice when you show up to get a bride down the aisle and when you show up to help a grieving husband figure out how to keep going by sending so many cards I stopped counting after we crested 100.

That's what you practice for Beloved, not a building, not a member page on realm, not the social connections that come from sitting in the pews, but of a life that has been reordered. A life that has been called together with other lives, other lives that are trying their best to respond in gratitude to the God we've been learning about throughout this entire Summer Sermon series.

A God who is three in one and one in three, who forgives our sins, saves us from destruction, reveals themselves in Christ and Creation, who justifies us, and sanctifies us, and in Divine providence provides for us, who predestined us to be their own, and who has called us together and called us out beyond this place so that what is happening here can happen in every part of this city, this county, this country, and throughout creation.

So why are you here?

What have you come to church for? Is it the people that make up this congregation? Is it a need, a pain so tender that you know in your heart only God can touch it? Is it custom, culture, family history and duty? Why are you here? And what role do you play? Are you a consumer, have you come to receive healing, to encounter God, to be bandaged up and made well? Have you come to serve, to be sent out into this world to follow where God leads? Have you come to just be, to come away for a while from the ruthless pace of our society? Have you come to minister, to sing, to study, to laugh, to grieve. Why are you here; and are you open to receiving something different?

What makes the Church different and distinct is that the only lasting thing that binds its members together, more than socio-economic status, more than geography, more than language,

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nationality, or even race, is that they are bound together by an insatiable need for God, that can only be met in God, that can only be fulfilled as God moved throughout the lives bound together among a people that have been called together and called out in a place that happens to be called the Church.

That's what makes the Church different. Not the finery of its brick and mortar. But the people who each day respond to God's call upon their lives by confessing, "Thou art the Messiah, Son of the Living God." And sometimes, when you can't get to 1750 Union, when you don't want to come to church, when you feel you've grown past a need for God, or a desire to be in community, the confession will be where God replants the Church in your heart, "Thou art the Messiah, Son of the Living God." That is the central organizing reality of the Church, and so too, must be the central organizing reality of our lives. That we belong to Christ, and together all those who belong to Christ are the Church, at 1750 Union Avenue, in our homes, at work, in seasons of grief and despair, in Memphis, in this life, and in the life to come. We are the *ekklēsia*, God's people called out and called together, to the glory of God, Amen.