

“What is Church?”

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Steve Ramer

Scriptures: Selections from 1 Peter 1 & 2 (CEB)

1:1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's chosen strangers in the world of the diaspora... 2 God has chosen you... God chose you through the Holy Spirit's work of making you holy and because of the faithful obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

2:1 Therefore, get rid of all ill will and all deceit, pretense, envy, and slander. ...4 Now you are coming to him as to a living stone. Even though this stone was rejected by humans, from God's perspective it is chosen, valuable. 5 You yourselves are being built like living stones into a spiritual temple. You are being made into a holy priesthood to offer up spiritual sacrifices that are acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6 Thus it is written in scripture, Look! I am laying a cornerstone in Zion, chosen, valuable. The person who believes in him will never be shamed.

...9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession (KJV “a peculiar people”). You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light. 10 Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

11 Dear friends, since you are immigrants and strangers in the world, I urge that you avoid worldly desires that wage war against your lives. 12 Live honorably among the unbelievers. Today, they defame you, as if you were doing evil. But in the day when God visits to judge they will glorify the Lord, because they have observed your honorable deeds.

Sermon

“What is Church?” Well, for those of us sitting here in church this morning, maybe not a bad question to ask ourselves?

I suppose the first place to start is a dictionary? So here is what good old Merriam and Webster have to say. First they give us three possible nouns; a building for Christian worship. Second, an organization of religious believers, such as; a DENOMINATION or a local CONGREGATION or the entire institutionalized Christian religion. And third, a public worship service like we are doing right now. There is also an adjective, “of or relating to a church,” i.e. church government.” Church can also be a verb such as, “churched or churching.” So there ya go. Question answered, simple as that - sermon done! Ah but of course it is not that simple, is it?

Now I have been church-ed pretty much my entire life. At first I was brought to a church building where we joined with a group of folks for Sunday school, to sing hymns and to listen to a sermon. But we also went to church on Sunday and Wednesday evenings. We went to church for weddings and funerals. The place was called the Pleasant Valley Mennonite Church and we belonged to the South Central Conference of the Mennonite Church of the Mennonite Church. I learned early that the Mennonite church had a very long history and that there were Mennonite churches all around the world.

I was also aware that those churches shared many similar beliefs but also included some very different kinds of worship practices as well as lived experiences. And in our little town there were lots of other churches, like, Presbyterians, Methodists, Catholic

Throughout my adult life I have worshiped in many different churches. I have appreciated the liturgies of “high churches” as well as the spontaneity of low church evangelicals and Pentecostals. I’ve had church in cathedrals and I’ve sat on logs over a dirt floor and under a thatched roof. I’ve church-ed in homes, buildings built and designed with careful detail specifically to be a church and in retrofitted store fronts. I’ve also participated in deeply meaningful church services where I didn’t understand a single word that was being said. And while in seminary I learned the Black Church reference, “now didn’t we have church today!”

So “church” can mean a whole lot of things! As Mennonites our understanding of what is church must include at least three elements; worship, community, and mission.

According to Peter the church is alive, something that literally breathes! We are to be like living stones that are built upon a living Jesus, “...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession (KJV “a peculiar people”).” And in the spirit of last week’s sermon, Peter also reminds us that this holy nation of a peculiar people are also supposed to be “immigrants and strangers in this world.”

Yes, I think we can all agree that church must mean more than a building, or even more than a local congregation or a denomination. As Mennonites, historically, our commitment to community is one of our better legacies that we inherited from our Anabaptist ancestors. But for those early Anabaptists, community was not merely a convenient way to care for one another or to share resources, community was also crucial to each individual faith journey and ultimately for each one’s very survival.

The importance of being a “community of believers” was so strong, that the idea of being a solitary follower of Jesus seemed nearly impossible to them. For you see, those first Anabaptists had the radical notion that a true believer was actually supposed to

live out all of Jesus' teachings. But they also felt that no one person could do this all by themselves. Rather, they taught that we need one another, that we need each other for encouragement, for support and for accountability.

Even the Bible, they felt, could not be fully understood alone but must be read, studied, and discerned within the larger community. If one member claimed to have "a vision or a word from God," it was to be "tested" by the community, because they understood that the Holy Spirit would also make it clear to the group.

But of course we do not exist to merely meet our own needs. We must envision the future and we must en flesh God's dreams in order to be truly and fully alive. To be a living temple we must have a mission as well as beliefs.

We support, challenge, and encourage each other so that we can grow inwardly and outwardly!

And it just so happens that we say this in our Vision and Mission statement: "Our Vision: Pursuing God's dreams, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the Way of Jesus Christ. And it continues, "We seek God's love, compassion and justice within us, among us and in the world." "Our Mission: Engaging God's world justly, peacefully, joyfully and creatively in a Community of right relationship, unconditional love, and growth, centered in the life and teachings of Christ."

Neither emphasis, Worship, Mission, or Community necessarily takes precedence over the others, but each is always moving, changing, and interacting with the other two. Some of us may feel more inclined to emphasize one area while others can balance us by promoting another aspect.

The most important thing, as we seek to worship, work and live together, is the fact that we are all unique and each of us brings both a diversity of gifts and experiences as well as each one of us brings our own unique needs and desires. It is not at all about always agreeing with each other or always being comfortable with one another's peculiarities. It is far more important how we love each other and support one another. It is about being vulnerable, compassionate, and forgiving, and acting in ways that confound those around us.

Confounding them not with our dazzling perfection but confounding them through our very imperfections and peculiar-ness that may lead them to the only conclusion possible, and that is the source of Divine Love coming from heaven to empower us.