

Colossians 3:12-17

Acts 2:42-47

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Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

BE THE CHURCH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Four and a half years ago, I attended the three-day “Mission Celebration ’09” in Cincinnati. I was one of more than 700 Presbyterians who gathered to connect with PC(USA) mission workers around the world. Members of Presbyterian congregations in the Cincinnati area were our hosts for the celebration. At one point, a group of teenagers walked into the meeting hall. They all had on bright red T-shirts. On the front of their shirts was the message, “Don’t go to church . . .” I remember thinking, “That’s an interesting message to advertise at a church conference!” As they walked by me, I read what was on the back of their T-shirts, “Be the church!” I thought that was a great message to advertise at a church conference, especially when we were celebrating Presbyterian missions.

Three years later, the Presbyterian Church (USA) sponsored the Evangelism and Church Growth 2012 conference in St. Pete Beach, Florida. At one of the workshops, Kim Hammond, an evangelist from Chicago, asked, “How can you ‘go’ to church? We ARE the church!” Hammond went on to say that “church should be striving to be the ‘third place’ in their communities, referring to the cultural phenomenon of people finding that spot — in addition to home and work or school — where they feel a sense of belonging.” In the workshop, Hammond asked people to list places that might be such “third places.” Participants named the mall, Starbucks, the gym, sports organizations, pubs, hunting and fishing clubs, and casinos. In response to that exercise, Hammond asked, “Why are churches so seldom on that list? We should be sending our people out into the culture with the love of Jesus Christ, not trying to draw them out of it. We make it so hard for people to be disciples that they say, Sorry, that’s not for me.”¹

About eighteen years ago, a group of people here at the church, elected by the congregation and called the Pastor Nominating Committee, worked with the elders to fill out a Church Information Form (CIF). The CIF is something like a church’s resume and is used to match a church that is looking for a minister with ministers who are looking for a church to serve. I saved the CIF. I pull it out from time to time and read through it, as a reminder of what our congregation said about this church many years ago. In particular, I re-read and think about the direction our congregation said they wanted to go in.

Obviously, our congregation is a much different place than it was back in 1996, when the CIF was written. However, some of the comments are still relevant today. For instance, near the end of the CIF, you can read these words: “The scriptures tell us

Jesus is the answer; we need to believe this and act on this belief. Our church is the best place to start. The message heard in our church should lead us back to Christ, and we need to follow this message. We believe our church needs to have an active membership who regularly worship, pray, study, and fellowship together. We must be active in the community, helping those who are burdened, lonely, or in need. We would like to have our members to be involved and to have our membership grow. Wallace is a wonderful community, made up of many fine people who desire to make a positive influence. The Wallace Presbyterian Church consists of many of these people. We are very capable mentally, physically, and financially and need to develop these qualities to best serve God.”

I like that phrase, “Our church is the best place to start” — especially when we remember, “We ARE the church!” We can go back in history a lot further than eighteen years to get a clue about how to “be the church.” Listen again to Luke’s description of what the earliest Christians did to “be the church” after the miracle of Pentecost: “They were devoting themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. . . many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. All of the believers were together and had all things in common . . . Daily they were in attendance together in the temple, breaking bread in the home, sharing food in gladness and with humble hearts, praising God and having the goodwill with all of the people.” (Acts 2:42-47)

You don’t have to “go” to church — or even “be” the church — to do many of the things Luke talks about.

You can read and study a good, inspiring book with your favorite book club.

You can enjoy good fellowship with close friends in lots of different settings.

You can enjoy a good meal and break bread around your kitchen table, at the River Landing Clubhouse, at Al Bustan or the new Tokyo Sunrise restaurant on Main Street, or at the beach.

You can help other people through Rotary Club or by participating in any of the many BBQ benefits around town.

So, the activities themselves don’t define us as the church of Jesus Christ. It’s not so much “what” we do (although that’s certainly important), but “why” and “how” we do what we do: in prayer, in community, praising God, with glad and generous hearts.

Comparing the 21st century Wallace Presbyterian Church to the church of the early 1st century in Jerusalem is helpful, but it can also be discouraging. Have you ever heard anybody say, “The church just needs to get back to the way it was in the New Testament”? It’s kind of hard to argue with that thought, *if* that means we ought to devote ourselves to the study of the scriptures, to fellowship among believers, to caring concern for other people, and for genuine worship and thanksgiving for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

However, if we say, “The church just needs to get back to the way it was in the New Testament” because we think the early church was flawless and the people in it were different than we are, then we’d be mistaken. The early church was made up of

people like you and me — people who need God’s amazing and saving grace in Jesus Christ, people who are trying to live faithful lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, people who don’t always get it right, people who depend on God’s grace and guidance in all of life. That is what it means to “be the church.”

A few months ago, a friend and mentor of sorts (who happens to be a retired Baptist minister) encouraged me to re-read a book by Howard Rice called *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers*. When Nancy and I were at the Cedar Cross Retreat Center near Louisburg week before last, I finished reading Rice’s book and I planned my preaching for the summer. I guess it was because I decided to preach on this description in Acts about what it means to “be the church” that some of Howard Rice’s comments almost jumped off the page. He begins a chapter called “The Discipline of the Christian Life” with these thoughts: “The Christian life is not a matter of simply trusting in Christ and having everything work out as we want it to. The Reformed tradition has never tried to simplify the complexities and ambiguities that continue to plague the Christian throughout life.”

What really caught my attention came later in the chapter, when Rice says, “[The New Testament church’s] corporate life was shaped so that it stood out in the midst of its culture, not so much by what it did not do as by the positive nature of its corporate life . . . Here was a community that stood out in a world of greed, religious cynicism, and a terrible disparity between the few rich elite and the great masses of the poor, whether slave or free. . . The Christian faith . . . offered a new vision of life. It presented a new way of being in the world, in which people mattered, in which there was mutual love and care, in which there was something worth living and dying for. . . What we believe is shaped by our actions, and our actions are an expression of what we believe.”²

Several years ago, while getting ready for a New Member Class, I took the time to try to list everything we do around here at the Wallace Presbyterian Church. That was quite an undertaking! I used a calendar, old newsletters, and bulletins to make the list. You know how it is when you try to make a comprehensive list — you always leave something out! Also, the list has had to be revised, almost from year to year, as new programs or ministries are added or changed. The list ended up being divided into four categories: Christian Education; Programs; Outreach Ministries; and Special Worship Services — three pages, single-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 point font.

The question we need always to ask ourselves is, “Are we being the church in all of the things we do? In our education, our programs, our outreach ministries, our special worship services? Do we stand out in our culture, “not so much by what we do not do but by the positive nature of our corporate life”? Do we offer “a new vision of life, a new way of being in the world”? Does the Wallace Presbyterian Church offer a place “where people matter, where there is mutual love and care, where people can find and commit to something worth living and dying for”?

Another way to talk about “being the church” is to talk about our faith and practice. Why do we do what we do? It has to be grounded in our faith in and love for Jesus Christ. Why do we do what we do? It has to be an expression of the very things we

believe. Why do we do what we do? It has to move out beyond ourselves — not just “Jesus and me” — beyond this church building (shouldn’t we really say, this building that houses “the church”?).

Our epistle lesson from Colossians 3 is almost a commentary on Luke’s description of what it means to “be the church.” Paul talks about compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Paul talks about forgiving one another, just as the Lord has forgiven us. Paul talks about the love and peace of Christ. Paul talks about being thankful. He talks about the Word of God, about teaching one another, about singing and praising God with gratitude. Paul’s summary statement says it all about what it means to “be the church”: “And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Colossians 3:17)

Several years ago, our presbytery met at the First Presbyterian Church in Lumberton. As we pulled up to the church, I saw a rather prominent sign in the parking lot that said: “Worship regularly. Serve eagerly. Live worthily. Give generously.” That’s a good description of what it means to “be the church.”

Let’s go back to those red T-shirts in Cincinnati. Actually, I hope you will “go to church” — to devote yourselves to the teachings of the apostles, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to the prayers, to caring for others, and to praising God. “Our church is the best place to start.”

Most of all, I hope we will “be the church” — not just here in this place, but out there where you work and play and go to school and live as disciples of Jesus Christ, who alone is Head of the Church.

NOTES

¹Jerry L. van Marter, “Don’t ‘go’ to church, evangelist tells ‘ECG 2012,’” at www.pcusa.org/news/2012/8/3/dont-go-church-evangelist-tells-ecg-2012/

²Howard L. Rice, *Reformed Spirituality: An Introduction for Believers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 181-182.

Let us pray: Almighty God, through Jesus you say to us that whoever wishes to be first must become the least and the servant of all. We know that your victory is won through the powerlessness of the cross. We pray that your church may be one. Teach us to accept humbly that this unity is a gift of your Spirit; through this gift, change and transform us and make us more like your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.