



Following Jesus Part 4

Title: Is there hope for the church?

Gospel Wheel Focus: Community

Text: Acts 2.42-47

Happy Mother's Day! We are going to address you later in the service, but you are awesome. It's the hardest most important job in the world and everybody knows I'm right because nobody is going to DARE stand up and say their job is harder.

One Service Time at Independence – 10:30

Today we are talking about something very personally important to me, something I have and will continue to give my own life's work to. It's a vision that captivated me as a college senior and I really haven't been able to let it go. The story of scripture is the story of God coming to rescue & redeem his people. Maybe the most famous verse in the bible, John 3.16, says he loves these people SO much he died for them. Then, the new testament paints this INCREDIBLE image of these redeemed people living as an interdependent community. Though most were living in EXTREME poverty, they were meeting one another's needs with joy & sacrifice. Displaying Christ to one another. Going out together to share the great hope of Christ with the world! They were persecuted, tortured, and killed together by their enemies and yet their message could not be stopped. They were the most bizzare, loving, unusual, sacrificial community the world had ever seen.

I saw THE CHURCH, the body and bride of Christ, radiating with joy and sacrificial love...changing its world for good...each of them so confident in where they stood with Christ they joyfully gave their lives to something GREATER than themselves. And Jesus called this group of people his bride. He promised never to leave it. He promised nothing would ever overcome it. He promised to be present among these people. That his spirit would unite them in a supernatural way to one another. And he FEIRCLY loves the church. So much so that he refused, even when it was at its worse, to separate himself from the church.

And I was drawn to THIS description of the church.

But here's the thing: I hadn't seen that kind of church before. I had seen church with hollow words and unspoken agendas and biases. Maybe you've been disappointed too. I knew church as a building, as a religious routine. And on a couple of occasions as a place of pain.

But I read Jesus' words and he said the church is his bride. So I knew I couldn't have Jesus without the church too. So I started praying. God, help me be a part of building YOUR church.

And I've been praying, dreaming, and working for that for the past 15 years. And I believe there

is hope for the church. And my belief rests solely on how powerful God is and that he says he loves it so much.

In this series on following Jesus we have two weeks left. Today I want to paint a picture for you of what the church should be. I want to give you a vision for the church I'm praying Mercy grows into. I'm not going to

So here's what we are going to do. I'm going to go to the passage that kick-started my journey. Acts 2.42-47. And I'm going to try and show you our vision for what Mercy Church is trying to become. And I hope you leave here today marveling at how much God loves & treasures the local church. And I hope you have a conviction of how to respond. And if you are like...Ummm I'm not a Christian. Well, all the better. Because you get to hear what the church is supposed to be about. You'll get to hear what the bible says the church should be.

So our outline: Who the church IS and then what the church DOES. Make sense? Identity and then practice. Acts 2 will be our main spot. I'll pull in some other spots in the bible that offer further explanation but this will be our main text.

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer. 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and signs were being performed through the apostles. 44 Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. 45 They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple, and broke bread from house to house. They ate their food with joyful and sincere hearts, 47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. -- Acts 2:42-47

Now I need to say: This wonderful picture is just that...it's a picture. It's describing what a group of people did in response to the gospel. It's not a 1-1 prescription for what we are supposed to do. BUT, by and large it does prove to be a model of what happens when we follow Jesus together as a local church.

They – Let's do a little investigation for a minute. Let's get some context on who THEY were. Whenever you see that in the bible...a pronoun or a "therefore" or something like that...you gotta go back and look at what its talking about. So who are THEY? Well, right before this verse that is kind of a summary picture, you have Peter preaching a sermon to a large crowd of Jews who came from every nation 'under heaven.' Peter is preaching the gospel to them. And now they hear the gospel that Jesus, who they killed, died for their sins. BUT he didn't stay dead. God raised him up! Death couldn't hold him! His finishing line is...

36 "Therefore let all the house of Israel know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. -- Acts 2:36 (CSB)

So this group of Jews from every nation in the known world says....

37 When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: “Brothers, what should we do?” 38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, each of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit -- Acts 2:37-38

41 So those who accepted his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand people were added to them. -- Acts 2: 41 (CSB)

The Church Is believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ok I know that sounds crazy simple. But this is VERY, VERY important. The Church, according to scripture, is made up of those who believe they need saving from their sin and find that salvation in Christ. That has some HUGE implications doesn't it?

The church is a body of people who share this common belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, It's a group of Christians. Which means...Listen this is really important and often illuminating for those that grew up in church. God makes abundantly clear in scripture that you are not a Christian just because you grew up around Christianity. Proximity to Christianity doesn't make you a Christian. NOR does your list of spiritual and moral accomplishments. I've known many who've gone through some spiritual rituals as children and then tried to live a life that does enough good to outweigh the bad. And they believe that combination of childhood rituals plus good living makes them Christian. IT'S JUST NOT TRUE. And listen I'm not knocking either of those things ok. Those are deeply personal and valuable things, especially those childhood rituals. I'm saying we have to measure our faith by Ephesians 2.8

8 For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift — 9 not from works, so that no one can boast. -- Ephesians 2:8-9

And some of you have kind of wandered out of your parents faith into adulthood and you might call yourself Christian but have you ever responded to the gospel like we see these first believers doing? If not, you can today! And MAYBE that's where the disconnect has been. You think...I know church is important but I'm just missing something in it. Well, maybe its that you've been missing the gospel! The thing that creates our shared unity. And by the way that's why we baptize people AFTER they profess faith. Because it is both modeled and taught in scripture. It is your visible sign to all the other believers that you are joining them in their belief!

Now that leads me right to the next thing about what the church is:

The Church is: Forgiven Sinners walking in grace and truth.

I need this one to sink in because otherwise we could have a romanticized view of the church. Listen this passage paints with a broad brush about what the church looked like. And that's intentional and important. The Good needs to rise to the surface. BUT, the church wasn't full of perfect people, it was full of forgiven sinners. All you gotta do is go over to 1st Corinthians if you want to see that. Paul is writing to a church that has really gotten things messed up and he's providing some correction that he didn't think he needed to say but obviously has to. Arguments and factions being made over who their favorite teacher was
People are suing each other in the church & going to court

1 Corinthians 5 – a Guy is sleeping with his fathers wife....BEST CASE scenario, it was stepmom.

Now God doesn't celebrate this. But he does offer forgiveness to us. And so the church should be marked by humility and forgiveness. By love for sinners because WE ARE SINNERS. And you need to look for how a church handles conflict and disappointment. Listen, if you stick around Mercy Church long enough I've got one promise: SOMEBODY is going to disappoint you. I mean if we can be REAL candid...I know that I, spence, have let some of you down. I know that because we've sat down and gone through conflict together. I am not the perfect pastor, that's Jesus. You are not the perfect church. That only exists in heaven. So God says to us:

32 And be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving one another, just as God also forgave you in Christ. -- Ephesians 4:32 (CSB)

So here's what you look for in a church: Do people grieve their sin? Do they repent to one another? Do they forgive one another? Listen there was a couple I just let down recently. They needed help in their marriage, and I accepted the responsibility to help. And I just didn't get to it. And it hurt them. Hurt their trust in the church because I'm the pastor. And I had to sit down with them and just apologize and seek forgiveness. And that wasn't easy for them to give. And it crushed me. God did a number on me through that. Showing me that even lead pastor spence is not immune to sin. And that when I repent, as huge of a hit to my pride as it is, man I too can receive the message of grace through a fellow brother and sister in the church.

So listen, you find a church that preaches the gospel clearly and practices gospel forgiveness and repentance...you gotta get in there. And participating in good local church life is a powerful thing. But you won't experience the beauty of the gospel that Jesus designed the church for until you are close enough to others that they could disappoint you. And they WILL at some point. And you will disappoint them. And when that happens...will you choose to put into practice the gospel you've come to believe? The way we say it around here is that we approach all of our relationships with the perspective that **"I am a sinner first, and sinned against second."**

That's the church. So if you can't admit you are a sinner...then you don't have a place in the church. But if you can gather in and say listen I've got sin and I don't want it. And the struggle is real because I see the world around me is broken but even more I'm coming to see I'M broken on the inside...and I sin against my family, my friends, and I realize in all that I'm sinning against God. Man I NEED HELP....THEN...you are ready to be a part of the church. Because that's who we are. The Church is not a resort for the healthy, it's a hospital for the sick. It's Sinners who have found a never-ending source of grace.

Those are two gospel identities I want you to think on. I'm actually going to share a lot more about the church but I want those two on your mind. Believers who walk in grace & truth. with those two gospel identities in mind, I want to move into What the Church Does. What rhythms do these believers, rejoicing in their forgiveness, practice in every day life. And yes, we gotta look at their rhythms and say what are we missing out on? Because this isn't here to guilt you. It's painting a WHAT COULD BE picture.

This first one might seem like the simplest thing I say all morning but it starts to have practical, important implications. Look at our passage.

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, **to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer...**44 Now **all the believers were together** and held all things in common...46 **Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together** in the temple, and broke bread from house to house

The church commits to gathering together

When you experience the life transformation that comes in Christ, one of the most comforting and powerful parts of that is God saves you INTO the church. We have this powerful shared identity. In fact the new testament uses a couple of pretty binding metaphors to talk about the members of the church. The most common one is the one Jesus gave the church. We Christians are a family. That may trigger good or bad emotions in you, not sure. But Jesus said that's what we are and every time Paul addresses believers in his letters he calls us brothers and sisters. Family. Because there is a commitment we are to have to one another that is tighter than family bonds. But he actually uses an even stronger metaphor to describe how bound we are to one another. He calls us the BODY of Christ.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and individual members of it. -- 1 Corinthians 12:27

Christ is the head and each one of us are body parts. And he paints a beautiful picture of the body working together & depending on one another so that the whole thing can glorify Christ. But a body needs every part. And get your mind around this...if you are a Christian you are now a church body part. But the body only works if all the parts are present. The shoulder can't be saying...I haven't seen elbow in like 3 weeks. Anybody know where she is? Nose really needs finger to pick it, but elbow is no-where to be found. Mouth really needs to bite fingers nails but can't!

See the members of a local church are to be interdependent of one another. We aren't co-dependent where we just take take take from others. Nor are. We independent where we just exist on our own like we don't need anybody. We are interdependent. We give & we receive grace from one another. And here is what is so beautiful...Human beings were created for that kind of friendship, that kind of community.

When God created the world...Genesis 1...he created humans uniquely different from the rest and do you know what he says:

26 Then God said, "Let **us** make man in **our** image, according to **our** likeness. -- Genesis 1:26

The ORIGINAL blueprint for a human...was God reflecting on himself. The beautiful mystery where God is one essence but three persons: God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit. Existing for all eternity in a loving community together. Enjoying one another, celebrating one another, exalting one another. And then God says ok the person we create...to be the crown jewel of creation...we gotta let them experience at least some degree of this wonder that is the interdependent communion in the God-head. So when He created ONE, God said for the first time in all of creation...well this is not good that he is alone. Let's give him somebody so he

can experience love, compassion, laughter, trust. Here you go Adam... another person. A woman who is a human but is a different kind. Same essence, different person. And then God says this is very good. Because now you can experience what you were uniquely made for!

And that's WHY regardless of how you express it, you have a longing to KNOW and BE KNOWN by other people. To Love and Be Loved. There is a reason the most popular TV shows in history are all about friendships. FRIENDS, CHEERS, MASH, NEW GIRL, BROOKLYN 99, Golden Girls, all about friends who love each other no matter what. WE WATCH IT BECAUSE WE CRAVE IT. AND WE CRAVE IT BECAUSE WE WERE MANUFACTURED FOR IT.

And we see the members of this local church gathering committed to meeting together in two ways. In the formal way in the temple where they sat together under the apostles teaching. They came expecting to hear from God through the teaching of his word. Then they met in their homes eating together. Talking about the word, talking about their kids sports teams, talking about the latest concert they went to with the hottest new artists in Jerusalem, they ate meals together and they KNEW one another. And they said hey, I'll see you tomorrow. I'll see you Sunday. I'll see you Wednesday night. Because these people were committed to one another. They were going to go to work and it was gonna be hard because a lot of people didn't share their faith but they knew they could count on seeing one another and that got them through.

That's because when you have genuine Christian community in the church, it feeds your soul. Guy in my community group Thursday said it: Man honestly a lot of nights I don't want to be here because I'm an introvert and its Thursday. But every time I leave I'm so glad I came. That's because Jesus designed GOSPEL-oriented community to replenish one another's souls. I've told you we gotta develop a regular rhythm of gospeling one another! Taking the hope of the gospel and speaking it over one another in everyday life moments.

"We should not ... think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotion. We should recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity, for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow Christians ..." – J.I. Packer

And that's a re-statement of Hebrews 10.24 that says we Don't give up meeting together as is the habit of some, instead encourage one another. According to a March 2017 gallup survey, people said the number one reason they don't attend church is they like to worship on their own. What if that's because they've never experienced the soul nourishing power of worshipping with a committed body of Jesus' followers!

In fact, let me get right to the next thing we see the first church doing because it connects to what we are saying here:

44 Now all the believers were together and held all things in common. 45 They sold their possessions and property and distributed the proceeds to all, as any had need.

When someone had a need, the church met it. The deacons helped get the church organized to meet one another's needs. We see that in Acts 6. And then every member of the church helped out. That's because **The church practices sacrificial love for one another**

This isn't surprising is it? It's what family does! When we lost Courtney's dad – Church sacrificed time, money, and energy to care for us. We were in need. When one of our members hits a rough patch and needs money for groceries or needs a place to stay for a while, we step in. We step in in emergencies but we don't serve only in emergencies. It is to be our posture towards one another.

Paul says something fascinating about the gospel and serving one another:

13 For you were called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. -- Galatians 5:13

He's saying...Jesus has won your freedom from having to obey a bunch of laws to earn God's approval. You are free from that drudgery because Christ has won your freedom! You are reconciled to God. Now what do you do with it? Do you use it as an opportunity to serve yourself or to serve others? THERE Paul says is where your life will reveal your heart. AND it's where you will find true life. In other words, we don't serve one another out of guilt-motivated duty, but from a place of gospel-motivated JOY!

So what does this look like? In practice, serving one another in the body of Christ means you count on others and others count on you. So let me ask you something: In the church...who is counting on you to show up? And who are you counting on? You know that's why we do ministry teams here at Mercy? It's to create easy on ramps for people to count on you and you to count on others.

See when the gathering starts to be something you OWN instead of something you ATTEND, it changes everything about it doesn't it? Can I explain to you how this could revolutionize church for you? Ok listen: the average church goer attends church 1.8 times per month. Why? Let's assume the best cause we are good friends. They come when they can. And let's say they leave thinking "man, that was good. Glad I came." Well, that's good. But if that REMAINS their view of church....well then the church faces a dilemma doesn't it...if we make the experience better MAYBE we can get them from 1.8 to 2.4 or something. Which we SHOULD DO THINGS WITH EXCELLENCE. But what is our motivation? It should be to help you follow Jesus.

So the actually the best thing I can do to help you grow as a follower of Jesus is call you to be present with your brothers and sisters in the church, and then to find a place where you can serve your brothers and sisters. And we serve in teams because that way you are in the trenches with a few other folks. And there in the trenches when you are doing a task alongside one another, that's where you start to find your community. Because you've got some people YOU count on and some people who count on you.

Last thing I want you to see today comes from that last verse. Verse 47.

Every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

How did this happen? It wasn't like the church was behind a wall and the Lord brought catapulted non-christians over it. No, the non-christians were around christians who were practicing these rhythms. And they got to see them loving one another, committing to gathering with one another, serving one another...and doing all of this not because they HAD to, but because they GOT to. And people who don't know Christ see that and are drawn to it. Because they were created for it like we already talked about.

The church welcomes the outsider because we were all outsiders.

This is why we talk about evangelism in the language of "who is your one?" because we recognize the way they are likely going to come to know Christ is through some kind of combination of hearing the gospel here where we are gathered and then being able to walk alongside of you and see how this really affects your life. That's the church...its an open book of people testifying to what God has done for us and willingly giving our lives away for others in response to that joy.

Let me say something before I finish: To get close to another person or group of people, might be a challenge for you. But that's how friendship is built.

Vulnerability and time turn people who have a relationship into people who have a friendship. That's what friendship is: vulnerability across time.¹ And a bunch of us together practicing this, that's the church God created. And the only way you can put yourself out there, is if you find your security in Christ. Listen, it's the hardest thing for me as a pastor ok. Because I fear if I'm vulnerable then I'm exposed as having flaws and then I won't be seen as worthy to be a pastor.

But what is the alternative? Distant friendships with people who don't see my day to day? Or total isolation? Not worth it. I'm a shepherd yes. And YES I'm held to a higher standard scripture says. BUT, scripture says I'm a forgiven sinner in need of community for the health of my soul. So I dive in. Trusting others as I do. And that's hard. But the alternative is way worse.

The road of Satan is independence—in C. S. Lewis' picture of hell in *The Great Divorce*, the houses get farther and farther from each other. The goal of Christianity is dependence on God—and where is God? In the church!

The church is the bride of Christ. – close in the gospel.

¹ From The Common Rule. <https://www.thecommonrule.org/conversation-with-a-friend>

