

Getting Started 3 The Gospel Community

Good Morning Mercy Church! We are in week 3 of our getting started field guide for what the Christian life is all about. In fact I'm loving this series because I'm realizing that the "getting started" series is a flyover of the things God is going to use to radically change your life for his glory. I had several conversations last week with people who needed that freedom from Good-Day Bad-Day religion. And if you will keep diving in to the approval you have in Christ...I promise you will find joy there.

Today I am going to share with you a deep passion of mine. Today we are talking about the people of God. And Jesus gave a new name to the people of God and it's a name we still carry today and that name is The Church. The Church is so central to the new testament and so important to Jesus that you simply cannot "get started" in the Christian faith without it. There is no way to read the bible where the church doesn't emerge as the centerpiece of God's plan for you personally and for the entire world. And in a minute I'm going to show you that. I'm going to show you the HUGE HEART Jesus has for the church. I mean he is crazy about it. And then after that I'm going to talk about the things that will stop us, Mercy Church, from being the church God has called us to be, and then we'll finish with how you "get started" with the church.

But listen I want to briefly address what is, for some, the elephant in the room. I've been a part of 4 churches

my whole life. That's it. The first two experiences did not end well. They left scars. I've shared that story before and I'm not going into that here but lets just say it hurt and it left me deeply skeptical of church. And I know some of you come in here and you've got deep pain maybe even your biggest scars, from an experience with a church. Breaks my heart. Church was supposed to be a safe, life giving place and instead it was painful. Or maybe you've never really tied yourself to a church before because you see bad headlines about churches and pastors and you want none of that. I just want you to know that I know. And my goal today is not to minimize that part of your story. Instead I believe if that's you, you are here today to receive from God a breath of hope. That's today. You will have to decide what to do with it but I'm giving you a message that was the result of years of prayer and study and the result of being in a church that loved me & led me very well. So I hope you will take your guard down enough to hear and consider this.

Normally at Mercy I take a passage in the bible and walk through it. Usually for multiple weeks. Today is going to be different. Instead of *studying* one spot, We are going to *survey* what the bible says about the church. Kind of like zooming out and getting the big picture if that makes sense.

Big Idea today: Church isn't a program you attend it's a people you belong to.

That's everything today. It's hitting the reset button on church and getting clear about what it is and how we

function in it. “HERE’s the church, here’s the steeple..”
- WRONG

3 parts: What is it? What is stopping us? Whats our next step

Church: What is it?

I want to show you the three most common descriptions the new testament gives for the church. These are metaphors but also very specifically chosen metaphors so you can’t write them off as just descriptions. They are God’s chosen labels for helping us understand his love for his people. So here we go.

The Church is Jesus’ Family

There is this moment in Matthew’s gospel where Jesus is in a crowded house with his disciples and he’s teaching people and his siblings & mom come to get him and somebody says hey Jesus your folks are outside. Here is his response:

[46] While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. [48] But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” [49] And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! [50] For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Matthew 12:46-50

What you need to understand is that this wasn’t casual. This was a teaching moment for Jesus. Where he was

re-drawing family lines. In fact he said two chapters earlier in matthew 10 that coming to faith in Christ would divide brother against brother. The new testament letters pick up on this language and the default term used by all NT authors, when addressing the church, was brothers and sisters. I found roughly 250 instances in the new testament where the writers referred to the church as family. So I can’t get caught up here listing all those for you.

It was so common because they were following Jesus. And Jesus decided his followers were to be a family.

And listen this was revolutionary! See, the world the bible was written into was a very GROUP-Centric world. Family blood lines were everything. Family took priority over the individual. We are reading this with western eyes that are steeped in a culture where the individual takes priority over the family. So in this day to say that following Jesus meant changing families...this was offensive and incredibly life altering. And I need you to see that is still true today. Listen you become a part of a family when you become a Christ follower.

The way I used to teach it to high school students was to think about your last name changing from whatever it is to “Jesus.” Spence Jesus, Mari Jesus, Amanda Jesus. Cause that’s who we are now. Our new family is the Jesus family. This practice of church as family would continue forward into normative practice in the church. One of the greatest early church writers was Tertullian. He was African, raised in what is modern day Tunisia. Here’s a little of what he said about this unity:

We call ourselves brothers. . . . So, we who are united in mind and soul have no hesitation about sharing what we have. Everything is in common among us—except our wives. - Tertullian¹

Not sure why he needed to clarify that there at the end. Some shady swingers cult next door or something I don't know.

Listen here is where this starts hitting home for us: In our culture it is easy to think of your faith as personal. And in a sense it is. Everyone has to come to belief in the gospel on his/her own. But when you are saved, you become adopted by God into his family. Which means if you want to experience the fullness of the Christian life...you can only do so when you are a part of the family. So I'm going to challenge you in a bit to plant yourself into a church family. If its Mercy, great! If not, plant somewhere. But you'll never get the fullness God intends for you without his family.

One last thing on the family: God's family is culture-rich. Colossians 3 says in the Church...in God's family:

[11] Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Colossians 3:11

See the family of God because it is bound together by Christ's blood it looks unlike any other family on earth. And this is why it is so important for the CHURCH to be multicultural. Because we show the world a family bound by forgiveness in Christ that anyone can join. And we've got a ways to go to get there as a church. I long for people of every race in charlotte to find Christ and belong to the Mercy family. Because that family is one that will be impossible to explain apart from the hope of Christ. Friends this means many things for us. To my white brothers and sisters it means being aware you are in the majority culture. And because of that you have no idea the burden a brother or sister of color carries by being in the minority here in our church. And I'd encourage you to find ways to put yourself in their shoes. Because if you have ever been the only white person in a restaurant or somewhere you know what comes into your mind is "should I be here?" That question is on the mind of any minority brother or sister who attends our church. The gospel says we are all one blood. So the answer is yes. And we have work to do to get to a place where anyone feels like the gospel is all they need to believe to belong. You shouldn't need gospel plus assimilation into a majority culture. Just gospel.

Last night I watched the movie the greatest showman and the bearded lady said something genius. She said to P.T. Barnum "Our mothers didn't want us. We have nothing in common & yet here we are all family." And I

¹ Apologeticus 39.8-11, italics added by Joseph Hellerman in *When the Church was a family*; quoted [p. 108](#). Kindle Edition).

thought: We are the circus. A bunch of strangers who look nothing alike but have found home together under one big tent called Jesus Christ. So whether you are a 15 year old black boy or a 50 year old white woman or a 35 year old bearded lady...if you believe the gospel, you are family. Gotta keep working to make mercy into that kind of family. Takes grace and humility and commitment.

All of this to say: **How committed are you to God's family? If you treated your family the way you treat God's family what would your family think of you?**

Now flip side here: Some of you have TERRIBLE family backgrounds. And the idea of church as family is frightening. I met a guy this week. 24. Came to Christ at 20. Dad - spent life in prison. When he was out he abused everyone in the family. When this guy Taylor came to faith he was skeptical of family. But you know what he found? Spiritual Fathers. Spiritual Brothers. The family he was always meant to have. God has multiplied his family. Matthew 19.29 - everyone who leaves father & brother for my namesake will receive 100 times that in this life. What is that? It's the church! Do you know the love of God like that? If not listen you know where you can experience it? IN the church! With spiritual fathers & brothers and sisters. **The Church is not a program you attend it's a family you belong to.**

And I'm here to tell you it CAN be that for you! We'll talk about why it falls short in a minute lets keep going. These next two I'm going to go a lot quicker on

The Church is Jesus' Bride

This one might be a little odd if you are newer to church, but the new testament portrays the church as the bride of Jesus. In fact, one of the most commonly used passages to teach on marriage is actually a passage about Jesus & his bride, the church.

[24] Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. [25] Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...[31] "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." [32] This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. Ephesians 5.24-25, 31-32.

John calls Jesus the groom in John 3, and Jesus describes himself as the groom in Matthew 9.

Here's all I want you to hear about this. It's a saying we say often around here: You can't love Jesus and ignore his bride. He and his woman are a packaged deal. If you say you want to be my friend but you are skeptical of Courtney, you don't trust Courtney, you don't have time for Courtney...well then me and you aren't going to be friends. Because I LOVE COURTNEY. I'm married to her. And if you want to roll with me, she's going to be there.

Listen: like a husband loves his wife, God LOVES the church. Fiercely and passionately. That doesn't make the church perfect ok. But it means flaws and all he is faithful to it. He loves it. And the awesome news is: If you are a follower of Christ...you are a part of the bride.

Which means he loves you fiercely. He is going to be faithful to you always because his covenant with you is not conditional on your performance in the marriage.

- BTW little marriage aside. When we model our marriage after God's marriage to us our marriage will be fulfilling. CONTRACT v COVENANT.

God's love is being poured out on you in this relationship. See how much he loves you? He calls you son or daughter. He is faithful and constant like a spouse.

Church isn't a program you attend, it's a marriage you belong to.

The Church is Jesus' Body

Last image might be the oddest if you are newer to the bible but it is a constant one throughout the new testament. That is that the church is a body and Jesus is the head of it.

[17] And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [18] And he is the head of the body, the church. Colossians 1:17-18a

The letter to 1st Corinthians talks about the body of Christ and it says

[12] For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. [13] For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or

free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:12-13

And here's the larger part there: If you are in Christ... you are a part of the body. Let me say it another way: **if you are in Christ you are a body part.** How about that? Feel a little weird to say? Some odd church anatomy lesson going on here. Now if what the bible says is true, You are NOT able to survive on your own because you are not the whole body. So you actually, whether you believe it or not, you need God's people because you are a part of the body.

[21] The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 1 Corinthians 12:21

THE BODY, to function rightly, must have all of its parts working. YOU NEED OTHER BODY PARTS AND OTHER BODY PARTS NEED YOU. This is not a hard metaphor.

The body parts all serve each other and they ALL get their instructions from the head.

I just got a cast off of my right arm after 6 weeks. Ya'll all I had was a broken thumb. In injury world that has to be one of the lowest. And do you know how INCREDIBLY inconvenient it was to have a broken thumb? I needed my thumb to tie my shoes, put on my clothes, hold ANYTHING. The whole body suffered from one tiny part not working.

Our thumbs are super essential and we just take them for granted. And some of ya'll are spiritual thumbs and

God could be using you in incredible ways in the Mercy Body. What body part are you? The only thing I know is that you are not the belly button. Because those are gross. God talks about your role in the body as a gifting. And there are no limits to the kinds of functions you could serve in the body. So here's my question: If the eye needs the hand, what is your function? Listen if you are in Christ GOD HIMSELF has given you a part to play in building his church. How awesome is that! You gotta jump off the sideline and get into the game! Not because I want you to, but because God has created you to!

Church isn't a program you attend it's a body you belong to.

And when we are all working together, serving one another and seeking to obey Jesus as we do, man think about what the Lord might do among us! That's the church I want to be a part of and I believe that's the church God is building here and I can't wait to see how many of you jump in and find out what your part is.

With all this...this awesome portrait of the church... Jesus's family, his bride, his body...I mean you can't ignore it and you can't distance yourself from it and be a healthy follower of Jesus. Let's talk for just a minute about what makes church difficult sometimes:

1. Sin - Ya'll big surprise here: churches are full of sinners. I always have to tell new pastors that your cool systems for discipleship are going to work great until you put people into them.

Church is a family of sinners led by sinners. And sinners sin. We do. Which is why we MUST rehearse the gospel every single day. I've told you before it should be common for us to be gospeling one another. That means repenting when we sin against someone and offering forgiveness when we are sinned against. Without it, we are gonna be a super dysfunctional family. Gospeling is the secret sauce to church unity. I promise you. So listen if you are like...yeah churches preach a message they don't live up to... THAT'S THE FIRST HALF OF THE MESSAGE! We'll never live up to Jesus. He's perfect we aren't. The second half is Ephesians 2 that says while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. So we are going to mess up. And there is room for one more messed up person to find the grace of God here. BUT LISTEN TO ME: Once you dive in...these people will be your greatest allies in your fight against sin. STORY - marriage crisis.

2. Fear - Because of sin, we are afraid of risking enough of ourselves to become a genuine part of the family. We don't trust each other enough to be more than acquaintances. You gotta take that to Jesus. And here's what I mean: The gospel says you have God's love given to you. So Paul says in Romans 8 if God is for us who can be against us? Do you believe that? That Perfect love casts out fear. God promises his love, if you will make your home in it, will build a foundation that is so strong no person can shake it. So you can risk trusting others because if they do hurt you,

you've got the love of your father that is in bucketfulls.

3. Loneliness - Ok I've found this one uniquely true in church planting. Everybody is new. And everybody believes what I've said about the church, yet feels alone. And ya'll I've been guilty of this: I'll wait on God to bring me a friend. And I'll say I've met some people but haven't found that real ride or die yet. Can I challenge you with something I heard recently: **Instead of trying to find a friend, try being a friend.** Instead of waiting around for mercy to become like a church home to you, plug into the church and make it your home! Some of you have been around for over a year and you aren't sure if its really your church yet. Of course it isn't. You've kept yourself at a distance. So here's my challenge to you: Step out and take the risk and go all in with a church. Doesn't have to be Mercy, we'd be glad for it to be, but I hope you will dive in. if the church is a family, don't be the weird aunt betty that shows up only at Christmas with a nasty casserole. Jump in.

In fact, that leads me to the last section of this sermon.

What's my next step? I've got 5 I think.

1. Repent and Believe - Listen we are OK with you being around the church if you are not a Christian. But I want you to know the CHURCH, in God's eyes, are those who've received his gift of salvation. And that's big because sometimes

when I ask people when they became a Christian they'll say well I was born a Christian. Well you may have been born into a Christian environment, but people aren't born Christians. They are born sinners. And we must each come to the realization we are sinners in need of saving and then receive that gift of salvation. Maybe you need to do that today.

2. Be Baptized - The new testament is clear that the first step of following Jesus, your first step as a Christian, is to be baptized. And the reason is that right there is your way of saying to the church: I'm with you. I believe. I'm joining myself with this belief and saying yes, I believe Jesus died for me. We are doing baptisms at the end of the month. Baptism has a specific mode: After conversion & by immersion. So if you got baptized as an infant that's great, but that was your parent's faith. Time to make it yours. And time to be obedient to God here and celebrate your salvation. CARD ON SEAT. One of our pastors will follow up with you this week if you'll fill that out and drop it in the bucket. Several indicated last week they wanted to take that step and I believe there are more today. Baptizing on April 29th. Gonna be awesome.
3. Join the church - These first three really are specifically for those of you getting started. There is a gathering on the 28th called "starting point" where you can learn more about what I'm about to say in 2 sentences: If you are called to

be so committed to the church, you gotta find a church and say “hey I’m in.” Too many people date the church and never marry her. Don’t be like that lame wanna-be player all the girls hate. Find out the info you need to find out and then go all in. That’s what starting point is for. Get on mission with the family.

4. Find a sparring partner - I’ve said this a couple times before and its kind of becoming a part of the culture here at Mercy and I like it. You ever watch Rocky Movies? Out of all the 7 part fictional boxing movie series, it’s the best. And Rocky 3 begins with Rocky getting just knocked out hard by Clubber Lang. Better known in pop culture as Mr. T. This guy is just too fast & powerful & in the second round he gets dropped and he says “I pity the fool.” Rocky needs training from someone who knows how to fight differently than he does. Because if Rocky goes back into the ring without changing anything he’s going to get the same result! So along comes Apollo Creed. The greatest fighter Rocky had ever faced. The two become friends. Well Apollo was always quicker & more agile than rocky. And that’s exactly the skill set Rocky will need to be able to beat the bigger, more powerful Clubber Lang. So Apollo downloads all his wisdom into Rocky. Then when Rocky gets back into the ring... he’s got new moves to use on Clubber Lang. And when you watch the final scene...You watch Rocky fight but he fights LIKE Apollo Creed. It’s awesome. See Apollo Creed is the difference.

Now let me make an obvious connection to your life. You need Apollo Creed. Period. The bible says your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And he is way meaner than clubber lang. And he will knock you out spiritually which means you will drift away from God and back into your sin. You need a sparring partner to reveal your weaknesses & blindspots to you. A fellow fighter who can lean on you and you can lean on them. And listen...Here’s something important about that relationship: Sparring partners care enough about each other to punch each other in the face. But they only do it with padded helmets. That’s how a spiritual sparring partner hits you. By that I mean truth is sometimes hard to hear. And when your sparring partner tells you truth...you gotta have the humility to receive it. And it will sting a little but it won’t destroy you like a hit from the enemy will. And if you will listen, you will start to pick up on the lies you’ve been believing that’s led you down the sin patterns you’ve been in. But it’s hard to hear it ok. Which is why you gotta have that trust. Iron sharpens Iron so one man sharpens another. This is the person or couple of people you are gospeling on a regular basis.

5. Lead others - Some of you are ready to step out and lead others in community. We need to plant 10 community groups by the end of summer to keep up with the growth we’ve had as a church and the new growth we anticipate. Community

Group leading may sound scary but Jesus builds his church not you. Jesus changes people, not you. You simply set the stage by being faithful, available, and teachable. If you can be F.A.T, you can be a great community group leader. Specifically these areas: _____

Closing - Church cannot be a program you attend, it has to be a people you belong to. Gospel creates that unity and overcomes your fears to it...