

Mark 3:7-19

“Jesus Established the Church (On Purpose)”

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5th Sunday in Easter

I think to whatever extent I’m faithful and gifted at being a pastor, at least a part of that faithfulness and giftedness is connected to the reality that the Lord has given me a capacity to feel things deeply - to enter into the suffering and difficulty of others.

But of course that also means that one of the hard things for me about being a pastor is that I feel things deeply.

And before I preach this morning, I just want to be honest with you all and let you know that this past five weeks have been very difficult for me.

I’ve been sad in all sorts of ways these past weeks and even months, and I think it’s important that I acknowledge that to you all - not so you can fix it for me, but so you can know how I’m really doing, and so that you can pray for me even as I pray - so you can pray that God’s kindness and mercy and renewing Spirit will be at work in my heart and life.

For I too, just like you, need Jesus to be my healer.

And now, we come again to God’s word. Our sermon text this morning is Mark 3:7-19, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship.

Listen carefully now to God’s holy and inerrant word.

“[7] Jesus withdrew with his disciples to the sea, and a great crowd followed, from Galilee and Judea [8] and Jerusalem and Idumea and from beyond the Jordan and from around Tyre and Sidon. When the great crowd heard all that he was doing, they came to him. [9] And he told his disciples to have a boat ready for him because of the crowd, lest they crush him, [10] for he had healed many, so that all who had diseases pressed around him to touch him. [11] And whenever the unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him and cried out, “You are the Son of God.” [12] And he strictly ordered them not to make him known.

[13] And he went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. [14] And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach [15] and have authority to cast out demons. [16] He appointed the twelve: Simon (to whom he gave the name Peter); [17] James the son of Zebedee and John the brother of James (to whom he gave the name Boanerges, that is, Sons of Thunder); [18] Andrew, and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew, and Thomas, and James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus, and Simon the Zealot, [19] and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him.”

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Let’s pray...

A certain theologian who wrote centuries ago once said this: “To those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother.”

The same theologian goes on to explain: “Let us learn, from the Church’s title of Mother, how useful, nay, how necessary the knowledge of the Church is, since there is no other means of entering into the spiritual life unless she conceives us in the womb and gives us birth, unless she nourishes us at her breasts, and, in short, keep us under her charge and government, until we become like the angels.

For our weakness does not permit us to leave the schoolhouse [of the church] until we have spent our whole lives as students within its walls. Moreover, beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for...[indeed] the paternal favour of God and the special evidence of spiritual life are confined to his peculiar people, and hence the abandonment of the Church is always fatal."

Who wrote these words? Not a Roman Catholic. Not a member of the Eastern Orthodox church. These words of deep devotion to the institutional church were penned by none other than John Calvin, the theological father of the Reformed Protestant tradition in which our own congregation stands.

Our own Westminster Standards, the official theological documents of our denomination, put it this way: *"The visible church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, outside of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."*

In the context of our modern age, which almost exclusively emphasizes the private and personal nature of religious beliefs and practices, these statements about the authority and necessity of the church, as well as the danger of seeking salvation outside its walls, may sound strange and perhaps even harsh.

In modern America, active participation in the life of the church is often presented as a sort of optional add-on, a kind of extra bonus for religious people who enjoy that sort of thing and find it helpful for their spiritual life. But in the end, the church isn't really that important.

And in case you don't believe me, here's some evidence. Several years ago, in a survey put on by Ligonier Ministries, 58% of Americans agreed with this statement: "Worshipping alone or with one's family is a valid replacement for regularly attending church."

And that was before Covid.

We all know men and women who would describe themselves as Christians but choose to neglect active participation in the life of an actual congregation--people who call themselves Christians but don't find it necessary to sit under the regular preaching of the Word, Christians who don't think it is important to receive the sacraments that have been entrusted to the church, Christians who don't believe contributing with their time or resources to the visible manifestation of the kingdom of God is a fundamental part of what it means to follow Jesus.

Where did this odd and (historically speaking) absolutely inexplicable idea come from - that you can be a Christian and not be an active participant in the life of a local church?

To answer that question fully would take more time than we have this morning, but at least part of the reason for this substantial error is a fundamental misunderstanding of Jesus' own intentions.

If you go into any bookstore, and find your way into the religion section, you will soon come across any number of books which have this basic thesis: Jesus of Nazareth never wanted to start a formal religious movement or build an institutional church -- but after his death, that old scoundrel Paul with his political and moral concerns came along, hijacked Jesus' intentions and decided to invent "Formal Christianity" which led in turn to "The Christian Church." And the rest, as they say, is history.

But to adopt this kind of thesis, and to call yourself a follower of Jesus without actively participating in the life of the visible church, is to either willfully or naively ignore a substantial portion of what we see in the actual historical accounts of Jesus' life in the gospels, not least of which is what we see in our passage this morning.

Take a look at our passage.

In verses 7-12, we see a summary of Jesus' ministry that has become typical for Mark's gospel. Jesus withdraws from Capernaum and goes out to the sea, where he is followed by a great crowd -- men, women and children are now going out to find him, coming from all kinds of places -- from Galilee, Judea, and Jerusalem, as well as places even outside of Israel -- Idumea, cities beyond the Jordan, even from as far away as Tyre and Sidon.

Jesus is no longer a local celebrity at this point - he has gained what amounts to an international, multi-ethnic, multi-racial following.

In fact, the crowds are so great that Jesus instructs his disciples to have a boat ready and waiting for him so that he can escape onto the sea and avoided being crushed by the people drawing near to him to have their diseases healed, their lame made to walk, their demons cast out.

Eventually, Jesus withdraws again, this time to a mountain. And there he does something very specific and intentional. Listen again to how Mark describes this part of the text, in verses 13-15:

[13] And he [that is, Jesus] went up on the mountain and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. [14] And he appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach [15] and have authority to cast out demons.

Jesus' choice of a mountain for this action is hardly accidental. It was at a mountain that the people of God were first established after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, and here Jesus constitutes the new people of God, which will be founded on his own person.

But how does Jesus inaugurate the foundation of his kingdom there on that mountain? Does it he do it by simply praying, meditating alone, communing with this Father without distraction?

No. Jesus builds his kingdom through men.

He chooses human beings just like us to build his church. Sinners like us. Men whose faith wavered at times, just as our faith does. He knew the apostles were flawed men, and yet he chose them.

And he chooses them with intentionality. Mark tells us that Jesus “*called* those whom he desired, and they came to him.” Jesus summoned these men to him, and he did so with purpose.

And once he had these men gathered around him, Mark tells us that he *appointed* them. The greek word that is translated *appointed* in this verse is a strong one. It actually carries with it the connotation of “made” or even “created.” It is actually the same word that is used in the greek translation of the Old Testament in Genesis 1, where we read that God “created” the heavens and the earth.

So after he *called* these men to him, Jesus appointed them, or *made* or *created* them as the twelve, the twelve men upon whom he would use to build his church -- he himself would be the chief cornerstone as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2, but these twelve would be part of the foundation as well.

And he gave them the name “Apostles” - a greek word that simply means literally “The sent out ones.” These would be the men whom he would invite to be with him so that he might then send out into the world.

And why would he send them out? Mark tells us in the second half of verse 14 and verse 15 -- he would do it so that he "might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons."

Jesus called these men. He appointed them.

And he cloaked them with authority -- authority to preach, and authority to cast out demons -- authority to do, in other words, exactly the same kinds of things that Jesus himself has been doing in his ministry. He sends the apostles out as his own representatives in this world.

And of course, this passage is fulfilled more completely after Jesus' death and resurrection, in the passage at the end of Matthew when he will gather these men again on a mountain and speak to them these words just before his ascension to his Father's right hand:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you, even to the end of the age."

Now, why would Jesus gather men to himself, and appoint them as apostles, and give them authority to preach and to baptize and to cast out demons and make disciples and to teach his commands if he did not intend to build an institutional church, if participation in the institutional church was not something he understood to be central to the lives of all those who would follow him?

Why would Jesus gather these men and send them out with authority if his only purpose was to set up individual chat lines to heaven for men and women who would eventually somehow come to trust in him, but would do so in the privacy of their own homes, never gathering together, never actively submitting to the authority that he entrusted to his apostles and the church they would build?

Why would Jesus do all this, go through all this trouble if he had no interest in the concept of organized religion?

The answer, of course, is that he wouldn't.

If we take the person of Jesus seriously at all as he is actually revealed to us in the gospels, we can only conclude that one of his central purposes, aside from the act of redemption in his death and resurrection, was to lay the foundation of a public and visible church that would continue his work after his ascension.

And he did so by granting his authority to flawed human beings by the power of his own Spirit.

As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, as we heard already in our epistle reading this morning:

"He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and the teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

Friends, my point this morning is simple. It is this.

Jesus of Nazareth, established the church.

And he did it on purpose. He did it with deliberation, with forethought and intention.

And the organized, visible church that Jesus established is not an accident. It is not a side project.

It is not incidental to who he is, and what he is about. The church was and is absolutely central and fundamental to the purpose of Jesus' incarnation, life, death and resurrection. And he sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in us for the same reason.

And this means that we are to properly value the church -- not only with our lips, but in our lives.

As Calvin put it so bluntly, to "abandon the Church is fatal." and to "separate from the church is a denial of God and Christ."

Why are we called to value the church? The reason is simple, really. If Jesus intended to set up a visible church, if he really did give to it apostles and pastors and teachers to build it up into maturity, then who are we to turn away from the means by which Christ has chosen to make himself known in this world?

Now, do not mishear me. I am not saying that salvation is impossible outside of the visible church. Our own Westminster Confession puts it well -- "Outside of the visible church there is no *ordinary* possibility of salvation."

God is merciful. God can work in extraordinary ways. God can save us even when we rebel against him.

But still, make no mistake, it is a serious and high handed error if we turn away from the church, if we abandon the preaching of the word, if we desert the sacraments, if we deny the visible fellowship of the saints.

Yes, God may still save us if we choose to worship him only in the privacy of our own hearts and the convenience of our own living rooms. But he will do so over and against our foolishness.

I know that I am speaking in strong terms this morning. But I don't believe it is unwarranted. I do so soberly, and with pastoral care.

One of my greatest concerns for modern American Christianity today is its lack of understanding regarding the intimate and essential connection between the authority of the visible church and the authority of Jesus.

Viewed through the lens of history, the apparent modern baseline assumption that active participation in life of the church is an optional add-on, and what really counts is our privately held beliefs about the person of Jesus would be understood not as a quirk, not as immaturity, but for what it is -- a dangerous and systemic betrayal of the teaching of Christ himself.

Jesus established the church. And he did so on purpose. And that means, that *"to those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother."*

But friends, our text this morning is not only a sobering reminder for us to properly value the church. Our text is also call to love the visible church, and to see it for what it is -- a merciful comfort to us.

The visible church is a comfort to us for this reason.

When Jesus left us, when he ascended to heaven after his death and resurrection, he did not leave us alone to somehow figure out on our own how to follow him, how to mature into his own likeness, how to be sure of God's certain love for us.

Jesus gave us the apostles. He gave us pastors, who, while not apostles themselves, continue the ministry of the apostles in our world today.

Jesus gave us the authoritative preaching of his word. He gave us the sacraments. He gave us the communion of saints. He gave us a great cloud of witnesses. Which is all to say, Jesus gave us the church.

And yes, one of the reasons Jesus gave us all these things is so that we would have to gather together each week with people we're sometimes not sure we really like all that much, people who are awkward sinners just like we are.

In his wisdom, Jesus knew that would be good for us - that it would keep us humble and ground us in all the right kinds of ways as we learn to mutually submit to one another.

But that's not the only reason he gave us the church. Jesus also gave us the church so that we would be certain of his love.

He gave us the church for our good. He gave us the Word and the Sacraments as real means of grace that we would be built up in our faith, so that we might even be made, by the power of his Spirit, like him.

He gives all these things freely -- he gives us his church not as a onerous burden, but for our good.

The church, beloved, is a gift to you. It is imperfect, yes. But still, it is a gift, and a sign of God's mercy and grace to your frailty and weakness, that you might, in the end, be saved.

Jesus established the church. He did it on purpose. And he did it because he loves us.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen!