

"Where Is the Church?"

Psalm 119:1-9; Mark 8:27-37

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 19, 2017—24th Sunday after Pentecost—Rev. Ronald Botts

I once had an opportunity to take a workshop on preaching at Duke University from William Willamon, then Dean of the Chapel. He is rather folksy in approach, but knows what it takes to communicate God's Word in today's world. He tells this story about a small church in the rural South:

"It is early on Sunday morning. A bright sun beams its first rays upon Bethel Church. A pickup arrives. A man gets out, unlocks the front door of the little church and enters. He is George Smith. Every Sunday at this time George comes to the church, turns on the heat or opens the windows according to the season, then returns home for breakfast before time for church.

"Sometime later a car arrives and Mrs. Lucy Thompson enters the church and goes back to the adult Sunday School room behind the sanctuary. As usual she places her lesson notes on the lectern, arranges the ten chairs in a semi-circle, then sits down to await the first class members.

"Her wait is not long, for soon two more cars roll into the parking lot, and the Johnsons and Tates enter the church. About 10:00 a station wagon rumbles into the lot and six or seven young people, ranging in age from twelve to seventeen, get out of the car and enter the sanctuary. Four more cars arrive in rapid succession, bringing the number of people now at church to about twenty-four.

"Finally the minister, who is shared with another church twenty miles away, pulls into the spot saved for him by the door. The Sunday School classes now end; worship begins. It is Sunday once more at Bethel Church."

What Willamon describes here is repeated all across our country week after week, in almost unlimited variation. It takes place in sparsely settled areas. It occurs in sprawling suburbs. It happens in teeming cities like Columbus. It involves just a handful of people to as many as several thousand. It is made up of whites and blacks and people with all shades of skin in between. It's done in English or Spanish or Korean, or dozens of other languages.

It's the church at worship, just as we have gathered here today, and it is the most visible way a congregation manifests its sense of calling. Worship is the heart and soul of who we are and what we do. And the reason for all this goes back to our Gospel lesson for the morning.

The incident described in today's scripture is really a turning point in Jesus' ministry. It marks the time and place where his disciples, those closest to him, first recognize him openly for who he is.

"Who do people say that I am?" asks Jesus. The disciples are surprised by the question and answer by telling him what they have heard from others.

"Well and good, but who do **you** say that I am? You who are with me all the time, you whom I teach as we walk from town to town, you who sleep at my side, who do you believe me to be?"

Simon Peter steps forward. Whether he speaks only for himself, or as spokesman for all, he responds to Jesus' question by saying, "You are the Messiah."

As you recall, the Messiah had long been predicted among the Jews. Others before Jesus had been considered to be, or even claimed to be, the long-awaited one from the Lord; none, however, had ever proven to be so. The Chosen One of God was still awaited.

According to Mark's gospel Jesus avoids titles in his early ministry, but now a different time has come. Circumstances have changed. It is the right moment to reveal who he is in the light of the role he accepts, and so he begins with his disciples.

"Who do you believe me to be?"

"You are the Messiah," Peter affirms.

What Jesus puts into motion by affirming this title, translated "Christ" in Greek, is really about a movement and not a structure. What he begins with Peter and the other disciples is people-based and not building-related. This is surely what Jesus intended when he planted the seeds of the Church that day; yet, his vision would be subject to change almost from the start.

When folks speak of "church" today what usually comes to mind is place. The mental image for most people is a building. When I identify myself with Highlands to someone new the next question is usually "Where is the church?"

I think it's important that we first think of the church as people and not bricks or boards. It is portable and not stationary. Where the people are, the church exists. Of course the place where the congregation meets is not without importance, but that is always secondary. It is significant to remember that Jesus built his church upon individuals and not on a spot of ground.

At one of the churches I formerly served we had a magnificent building on the historic register. The sanctuary could seat 700, had a vaulted ceiling five stories high, and was decorated with tapestries that were woven in the 1500's. On the first Sunday I preached I challenged the congregation, foolishly perhaps, to consider the question of its identity apart from the building. What if, for some disastrous reason, they no longer had this wonderful structure. Who would they be without it? Would the church hold together or break apart? Would they be seriously weakened or would they find new ways to function and grow?

As much as we love this 80's comfortable structure at 6909 Smoky Row, it is not Highlands Presbyterian Church. The best that we can say is that it houses Highlands Church. What holds this church together is not its walls, but the bonds of people joined together in common service to God. It is also the sense of family we feel with each other as our lives meaningfully intersect.

Ultimately our structure is not our defining attribute; rather, what creates our identity is faithful witness, compassionate caring, and welcome for everyone. The rock upon which we are built has nothing to do with footers or concrete, but on those who have preceded us and who have made Jesus' love real and tangible in this community.

If I were given a chance to put some identifying statement over our outside doors, I believe I would choose these words: "This is not the church. The church is inside." You see, it's what is inside that counts. All the rest is outer shell, as attractive as that may be. Truthfully, there are a lot of impressive facades around where no life is left within, congregations that have died and left a hollow structure behind. These are simply monuments to what were once vital churches, but now no longer exist.

Our scriptures today remind us that we trace our roots back to Paul, to Peter, then to Jesus himself. Our heritage comes down to us by being handed on from person to person for two thousand years. Hopefully, we will hand it on to our children, and to our children's children, without end.

The work of the Church has been entrusted to us to interpret, shape, and communicate the Good News to the world in which we live. That's a big responsibility for mere humans, and I wonder sometimes if Jesus didn't overestimate our ability and resolve. To survive and grow, the Church must have strong and committed people today as in the past. It will require the best of our imagination and ingenuity to take the eternal truths of faith and have them speak to 21st Century people. That's a challenging assignment, but not impossible.

Now you won't find a street number on our building, but that's all right because Highlands Church is not an address. Instead, it is in our homes where family life is celebrated and cherished. It is in hospital rooms where we visit and cheer those who are ill. It is working at the food pantry where folks come seeking groceries to get through the week.

Highlands is also in our education rooms where we nurture in faith both young and old alike. It is in our Family Room where we greet each other in fellowship. It is in our sanctuary where we come on days like today to lift our praise to God in gathered community.

The church is us, whoever we are, wherever we go. It is the rock of Christ upon which we build our lives, and the solid place on which others may find and build their lives as well. Here we find direction as we engage with the Spirit which is all around us. Here we find guidance and support as we meet fellow travelers along the journey of life.

So this morning take a moment and look around you and you'll see the church. Then look just a little farther and you'll see the place where the church gathers. We love our building, but it's what is inside that truly counts.