

Date: August 3, 2025 (Pentecost 8)

1. Texts: Hosea 11:1-11; Ps. 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: identity and nature of the Christian Church.
4. Aim: shift operational theology.
5. Proposition: "The Church is the training ground for the relationship between God and his disciples."

## THE CHURCH IS WHEREVER GOD'S DISCIPLES ARE

A portion of our diocese is gathering at Camp Artaban this weekend. The Anglican branch of the Christian Church is getting together for fellowship, fun, food and faith. The participants will learn stuff about God and the Christian faith. They'll play games and share meals. Worship will be an important part of each day of the camp. For those who rejoice in the outdoors, it'll be a nice time, maybe even an important time.

But this made me think about the identity, nature and practices of the Church itself.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the Anglican Church wanted to be seen as a professional agency providing effective social services. These services focussed on social supports and interpersonal relationships. Clergy training emphasized counselling and education. Congregations were challenged to support the poor and to avoid trying to convert anyone to anything. Standards for clergy and lay ministers were developed. Having the right academic degree became more important than developing evangelistic skills.

Such emphases on professionalism and social services filtered into the lives of parishioners. Faith become more and more about doing good things for people in need. Good deeds became the lens through which faithfulness was viewed. God's love was proclaimed in good works rather than in words. "A picture is worth a thousand words" was quoted a lot. This actually dismissed the thousand words entirely. The Church was left speechless.

But here's the thing: the Church wasn't very good at providing social services. Social service agencies are better trained and staffed than any church. Social services should be left up to professional agencies to coordinate and make

the most effective use of resources and volunteers, many of whom should be Christians.

But these assumptions and practices left the Church questioning its own purpose. We were left questioning the identity and nature of the Church.

According to the New Testament, the Church is

- the people of God<sup>1</sup> and
- the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The Church is the whole collection of disciples who have a life-changing relationship with God through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Church is those people who obey the commands of Christ:

‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second [commandment] is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>3</sup>

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.<sup>19</sup> 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,<sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.<sup>4</sup>

The Church is actually expert and professional, but not in relationship counselling and social services. We are expert and professional in developing the saving relationship with God and sharing that relationship with others. The Church is the family God has selected to carry on the Christian faith. The Church is the heirs of Christ and the co-workers God sends out into the world to bring salvation.

Thus, the expertise we have to share with others is in faithfulness and in sacrificial service as a sign of God's love. Any good work is to be a reflection of God's grace which we have personally experienced. We proclaim the existence

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:11-12; Galatians 3:28-29; Revelation 7:1-8; 2 Corinthians 6:16.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 3:6.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:37-39.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 28:18-20.

of God and the truth of his gospel in both word and deed. We allow others to see that our lives have been changed by the grace of God.

Our primary training ground for all this ministry of love is our Sunday morning worship. It is on Sunday mornings that we practice loving others in word and deed. It is Sunday mornings that we more intentionally develop our saving relationship with God through Jesus. Our family's worship gives us the spiritual encouragement we need to speak to others. Our worship is our weekly workshop in the faith.

These truths must change how we think about the Church and our involvement in it.

Most non-disciples think of the Church as one optional leisure activity amongst others. It is ranked lower than sports and camping on nearly everyone's list of priorities. Gatherings with friends and neighbours are of greater value than Church.

But for disciples of Jesus, Church is a necessity. Just as we have to spend effort on three meals a day to stay active and healthy, so we have to spend effort on Church at least once a week. Being a disciple of Jesus requires effort and training. It is never enough to say, "Oh, sure, I believe in God." The disciple trains to love God and to love others. The disciple trains to proclaim the gospel in both words and deeds. The Christian faith is never just a matter of what you believe. It is not an intellectual thing. Faith is always a matter of practice, priorities, principles and actions. That's why we need the Church and its worship, so that we might develop as disciples of Jesus.

Now we have the bare minimum about the identity and nature of the Church. We have some idea about its goals and practices. We have an understanding about the role and necessity of our worship and related ministries. But now we have to figure out how to move all this "head knowledge" down to our hearts. The Christian faith is not about how much we know. It is about who we know—that is God, as he reveals himself to us in Jesus. "Head knowledge" has to become "heart knowledge", the certainty of truth that motivates us and

changes our lives. Intellectual assent to a list of theological statements is ineffective to change lives.

Listen to the voice of God.

<sup>1</sup> When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
and out of Egypt I called my son.

<sup>2</sup> The more I called them,  
the more they went from me;  
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
and offering incense to idols.

<sup>3</sup> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them up in my arms;  
but they did not know that I healed them.

<sup>4</sup> I led them with cords of human kindness,  
with bands of love.

I was to them like those  
who lift infants to their cheeks.

I bent down to them and fed them.<sup>5</sup>

This is God himself, begging you to be the Church, to live the life for which he created you. You can hear God's agony and feel his tears upon your own faces. It is God who is calling out to you, begging you to be his people because he is your God. Be the Church that loves and proclaims that love. Be the Church that worships as a family. Be his body in this world, so that others may come to know him in the next.

AMEN.

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<sup>5</sup> Hosea 11:1-4.