

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost • October 5, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Matthew 28:16-20; Augsburg Confession, Articles VII & VIII

“Back to Basics – What is the Church?”

During my undergrad years, I was blessed with the opportunity to study abroad for six months in Paris, which my parents supported. As part of this immersive program, I got to live with a French host family, take classes at the local universities with Parisian students, and take in the culture of the city. Beyond that, I also got to experience worship life with some French Lutherans. I guess it shouldn't be surprising in a country that is predominantly Roman Catholic, but there weren't a lot of Lutheran congregations in Paris. I did discover one that wasn't too far from the apartment where I lived. The first time that I went there, though, it took a little bit of looking through my pocket map-book to find exactly where this congregation was, but I eventually came across a building that looked quite a bit different from our facility here at St. John's: it was a relatively nondescript two-story building front, with the congregation's name by the main entrance. I entered and climbed the stairwell up to the sanctuary. Again, it was a little different that what we have here, about one-third as much space and certainly of another style. But when I came into the sanctuary, I saw the altar in the center, I saw the baptismal font, and I saw the pulpit. Talking with some of the members of the congregation, I introduced myself as an American exchange student – a Lutheran one, at that! – and they welcomed me in to worship with them. Picking up the hymnal, singing with the people, I found that even though the words weren't always familiar and the songs often different from those I'd grown up with, I was able to follow the liturgy. I understood the things that were going on around me. Even though the language was different and the hymns were a little hard to sing, I knew that I was in the church.

But how could I know that? What is it that makes a church “church?” When our church gathers for church at the church, celebrating Communion with the rest of the Church on earth and in heaven, *what* does this mean? This one little word can mean “congregation,” “worship service,” “house of worship,” and “everyone whom Christ has called to himself.” What is “church” to you? Is it a place that you feel like you have to come out of obligation each week, but don't really know why – you're just going through the motions? Or do you feel like you really can't be part of the church because of something that's been dragging you down, keeping you from taking part in fellowship with people that you perceive to be more holy than yourself? What is the church, really, and what is your connection to it?

As we go *Back to Basics* this weekend, let's take a look at the Great Commission in Matthew 28 and Articles VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession to see how these inform what it means to *be* the Church, both for the reformers 500 years ago and for us here at St. John's today.

Can we look around and *see* the Church? In one sense of “church,” certainly! We've got a building here, with a sanctuary and classrooms and a Fellowship Hall, places in which we can gather. We can look around and see the cross, that sign of what God has done for us. But do these buildings make “church?” Do you have to have these things in order to be the Church? No – the Church has appeared in homes and other spaces quite unlike this for thousands of years, yet it is still the Church. So are the *people* around us the Church? When we look at the folks sitting in the pews next to us or consider those in congregations miles away, we cannot tell if they are members of the Church: only God knows that. It might help to think of what some call the “hidden Church,” the company of all those who have been given faith; however, faith is hidden away in Christ. Furthermore, all of us are simultaneously saints and sinners, as the reformers would have put it, because we struggle with sin – it's not like the saints all sit on one side of the church. Imagine if

someone came in among us time and time again but didn't believe that they were both saint and sinner and in need of God's forgiveness, only to go out from this place to live in a way contrary to God's instruction. There's a word for a person: hypocrite. A hypocrite is not a part of the true, hidden Church, even though they may very much be part of a visible fellowship of Christians.

The true, hidden Church is not defined by outward circumstances. But we do believe that there are certain outward "marks" that help us to understand that the true (hidden) Church is at present. We, along with the reformers, confess that where the Word of God is purely taught, where His forgiveness through Christ's cross is made known, and where His Sacraments are given according to that Word, there is Church. So is what we have at St. John's part of the Church? By God's grace, yes!

There are five things that I'd like you to consider while considering our question of "What is the Church?" What makes the Church, what defines it, if we can't just look and see it in a building or in the people in the pews? **First, the Church's foundation is in the gospel – the good news that it proclaims in Jesus.** God instituted the Church and gave it an identity and assignment. Our text from Matthew 28, known as the Great Commission, shows us what it means to be the Church: sharing the life story, death story, and resurrection story of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God who came down to save us from our sin and hypocrisy, to bring about reconciliation, restored relationship with God. That is our foundation: we as the Church are to live out Matthew 28. We go out and proclaim the good news. We deliver the forgiveness of sins through God's gift of baptism to the people that so greatly need it. We teach and build up in Christ, growing as Jesus' disciples in fellowship with God and with one another.

Secondly: the Church is *not* a country club. This isn't to be an association where we'd just get together one day a week to hang out with people who share common interests and, maybe, go out to brunch. The Church is more *like a ship*. That's one of the ways in which the Church has been depicted since the early days: we can even see it in the architecture of many sanctuaries, where arched ceilings seek to remind us of a boat's hull. We gather together in this ship as we travel together as a crew – Scripture calls the Church "the body of Christ" – through the journey of life. We can also think of the Church *as a supply depot*. It's not a place to hide out from the world, but rather a location where God's people might come to be strengthened and equipped with everything that we need to go back out into the world, to live the Great Commission.

Third thing to remember: the Church is holy. The Church is holy. The Church isn't holy because of the people who are in it – we need only look in the mirror to know that. It's holy because of the God Who calls people in to it. The Holy Spirit has been and remains at work to draw together this fellowship of faith that we call the Church. He is here with us even now. Because the Church is God's work, it will endure until the end of time, regardless of the things of this world. In our text from Matthew 28, Jesus himself promised to be with us until the very end of the age.

Fourth thing: the Church is catholic. (That's "catholic" with a small "c" – important difference!) Here, and in its truest sense, "catholic" means "universal." Throughout time and space, every race and nation can be a part of the catholic Church, with Christ as our head.

And the fifth thing: the Church is apostolic. We share the same faith that was entrusted to the Apostles when Jesus gave the Great Commission. We are part of something which stretches back to the days of Peter and Paul, even if our pastors have not been ordained by someone in the line of the Apostles. And as the Church, we, like the Apostles, are sent. We sent to go out and share that good news which is the foundation of the Church with all those around us, to invite others in to participate in God's gift in Christ Jesus.

So, how might we live as the Church in the world today? I'm not going to give you a list of specific things that you have to do to be the Church. **As Christians, we live as the Church lives.** Because of what God has done, we know that the Church's foundation is in the Gospel, the good news that God's Son has come and that through him we are forgiven and reconnected with God. We know that the Church is not a country club, but a place and a people through which God strengthens us to be Christians in our world. We know that the Church is holy, that it has been instituted by God and that the Holy Spirit will sustain it through the end of time. We know that the Church is catholic, spanning all time and geography. And we know that the Church is apostolic: it comes from the Apostles, embracing the faith that was entrusted to them, and it is sent into the world to share the good news in Jesus.

So, what is the Church? Everywhere the good news in Jesus is purely taught and the sacraments administered according to God's instruction in His Word, there is Church. In homes and sanctuaries all around the world, hundreds of languages and many different styles of worship, people are coming together as the body of Christ on earth, to thank and praise God and to receive forgiveness and new life. Come, and be part of the Church with them, and with us.

Amen.