

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

October 2, 2022
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 17:11-19
2 Kings 5:1-3,7-15c
Psalm 111
2 Timothy 2:8-15

I heard an intriguing question this week. It's one of those questions that seems to be obvious on the surface but as you start to consider the depth of the question, your answers start to change.

Let me put the question out there for your consideration this morning...what is a church?

At first, you might begin by saying that a church is a place, where we gather on Sunday mornings. You might say it's a teaching, a guide to helping us make moral decisions. You might say church is a program, an outreach program that meets the needs of its members and the community.

Those are all good answers but I would suggest that they are the obvious answers...the things we can point to and say that is my church, the location I attend. And, notice what these answers are grammatically...they are all nouns. A place, a teaching, a program. But do those nouns do anything? Nouns by definition don't describe an action at all. They simply state what is.

Let's name some other nouns we might use to describe church. Things like, Christian, Faith, Community. What other nouns come to mind?

But all of these fall flat if they don't do anything. So let me suggest another way to answer our initial question. When we define the church, we need to use verbs. We need to describe what we do, what church can do, what faith requires us to do.

Church is not a building. It's not a lesson. It's not a program. Church is a place of transformation and a place of restoration, a place of healing and love and justice. It's a place that cares and cares deeply for every single person that walks through its doors. (Well, that is, when church is doing what church is supposed to do!)

One writer says that we should define church as mercy, the act of helping. I love this definition. Mercy as the action that grows out of the place. Mercy as the thing that helps us live out what church strives to create within us. Mercy as the idea that sends us out into the world to be the church. Not a tangible building, a place on the map, but a vibrant lived reality of love.

I have always found it powerful to recognize that Jesus didn't tell every person he met to follow him. Surely he called some to do just that but others, he simply loved. He healed. He liberated. He forgave. He showed MERCY. Not mercy with a pre-requisite of membership to a given faith

organization but mercy simply because that was the thing that grounded what Jesus envisioned to be the central aspect of his teaching and preaching.

In our Gospel, the lepers call out to Jesus in verse 13...Jesus, have mercy upon us! Help us. Care for us. Lift our burdens. And Jesus does just that. What happens next is important. Nine of the ten lepers walk away. Only one stays to give thanks for the mercy that he received.

What does Jesus tell the one man who thanked him? He tells him to “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Get up and go. Your faith has made you well.

Let’s pause for a moment to add some context to this narrative. When we hear words like cleanse and heal, especially when it comes to individuals who are physically sick, we think immediately of a direct change in their physical condition. But, look at the words to cleanse and to heal in the Greek give us a deeper understanding of what Jesus is teaching.

These words aren’t just about a physical transformation. They also describe an inner transformation.

To cleanse also describes for us a moral shift, freeing someone from sin, purifying them from bad decisions, lifting their guilt, purifying their heart. And to heal describes a wholeness not just of body but of mind and spirit as well.

That cleansing, that healing of mind, body, and spirit was what Jesus gave freely. Unconditional love shown through merciful acts of compassion and care. This is the church. This was what Jesus envisioned. Not mega churches. Not fancy programs. Not bells and whistles. Just mercy.

However, there is one more important point of context as we unpack what a church is supposed to be. Verse 19...¹⁹Then he said to him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.” Go on your way.

The verb “to go” in Greek isn’t a command to leave. It’s a command to continue the journey. To continue transforming. To keep working on your heart and mind. To extend the mercy you have been given to others. To continue Jesus’ love as you walk through your own life.

So mercy in our Gospel is twofold...it is a direct action from Christ to the individual and it is the individual’s response through a transformed life.

Jesus shows us mercy so that we can live. And we are to live abundantly. So if the church is a place of mercy, it is also a place of transformation. Of new life. Of a changed life. And we are sent out to keep up the journey.

The challenge for us is to embody mercy in all we say and all we do...we have been given this incredible chance for new life and we need to use it! We become the church. That’s the mission. That’s what the church is. It’s you and me living out the Gospel.

Pope Francis talks about the church as a field hospital...on location of trouble, at the front lines of need. But a building can't move to those places. We are to go to those places and be on the move...to go out and show mercy to each and every person who needs to know and feel the love of Christ, not just in words but in our deeds, in our transformational acts of loving kindness that lifts up the broken and oppressed, that helps the poor and the suffering, that stands up for justice and equality, that breaks down barriers and opens doors.

That is the church. It is our purpose.

We don't need super churches. And we don't need super Christians. We need willing churches. We need willing Christians.

As one commentator stated, healing is not a spectator sport. God has given us agency to be those willing Christians, to be co-participants in the richness of merciful acts. For the 10 men in our Gospel, they all sought out Jesus to show them mercy but only one had a willing heart to go and continue the journey.

What is a church? It is ultimately what we make it because we have been shown mercy and sent forth to participate with Christ in the healing of this world. That mercy is ultimately our greatest gift and our greatest responsibility.

Thanks be to God. Amen.