

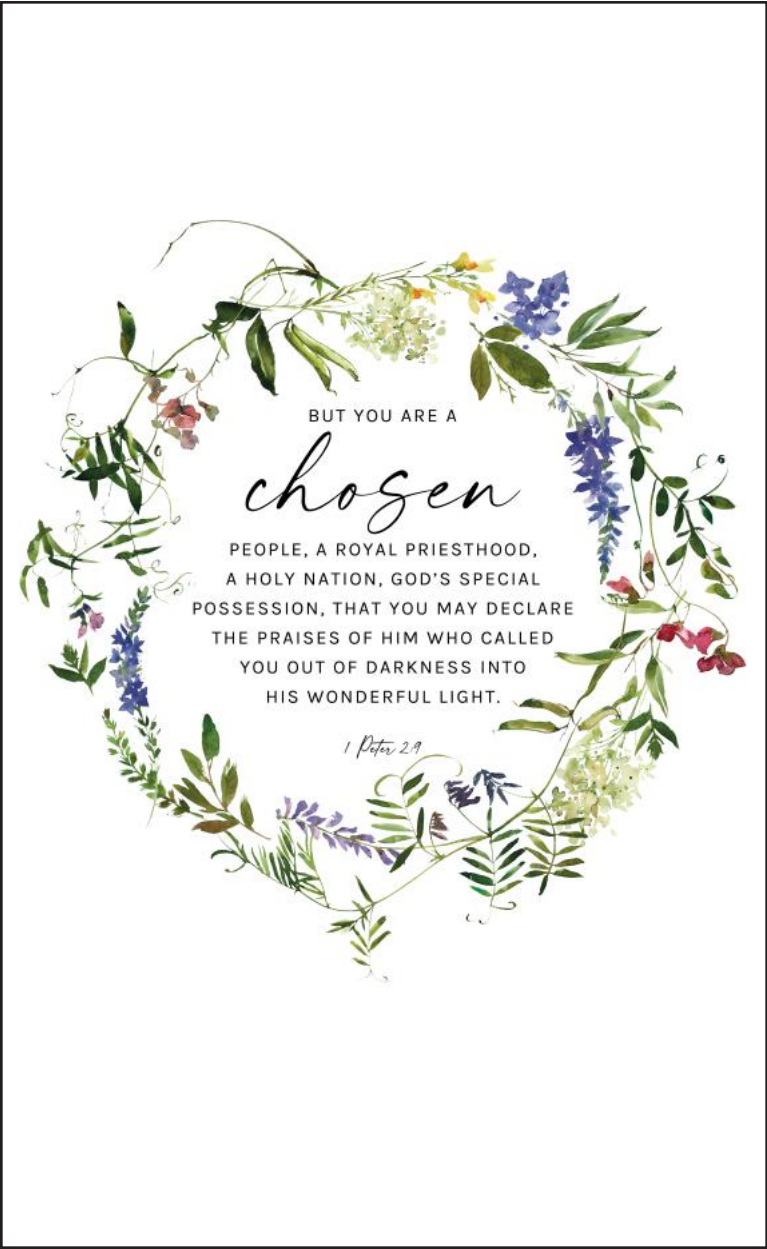
Lenten Sermon
And Study Series



What It Means
To Be the Church

Darren Cushman Wood

March 9 — April 12, 2025




BUT YOU ARE A

chosen

PEOPLE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD,
A HOLY NATION, GOD'S SPECIAL
POSSESSION, THAT YOU MAY DECLARE
THE PRAISES OF HIM WHO CALLED
YOU OUT OF DARKNESS INTO
HIS WONDERFUL LIGHT.

1 Peter 2:9

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INTRODUCTION

“But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9, King James Version)

From the very beginning Christians have been gathering under trees and in homes, beside rivers and in basilicas. While the places and the faces have changed, the picture is the same: the church.

In this study we will examine the different pictures of the church we see in the New Testament. As the old saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. These images of the church express the multidimensional nature of the church and the diverse roles the church plays in society. This study is based on Paul Minear’s classic book, “Images of the Church in the New Testament.” While he identified 96 images, we are only looking at five.

The Word “Church”

Before we dive into each image we need to parse out the meaning of the word “church.” Most versions of the Bible translate the Greek word *ekklesia* as “church.” It means “assembly,” and in the Greco-Roman world it had a public connotation. It was used both in reference to impromptu gatherings as well as official civic meet-

ings. An *ekklesia* could be a civic religious gathering, a political meeting, or an association of artisans.

“*Ekklesia*” appears 118 times in the New Testament, most often in Acts and 1 Corinthians. Matthew is the only gospel in which it’s used, and it’s probably the writer reading back into Jesus’ words (Matthew 16:16; 18:17).

Basically it means a visible assembly of people who have pledged their allegiance to Jesus as God’s anointed one (“Christ” or “Messiah”). It does not refer to a building or an institution. One should not read into the New Testament’s use of “church” the organizational structures that developed with later generations of believers. Rather, it is a visible gathering based on the Hebrew ideas of covenant-making and divine calling.

Today we use “church” in all sorts of ways: a local congregation, an international denomination, a designation for all Christians around the world, a building, a Sunday worship service, or a type of religious organization. This study does not use a precise definition of “church.” Rather, the purpose of the New Testament metaphors is to push us to think about the many ways we are the “assembly” of Jesus.

In its most basic sense a church is any intentional gathering of Christians who come together to worship, support each other, and work together in the name of Jesus. The United Methodist’s Articles of Religion offers this summary:

“The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful [people] in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.” (Article XIII)

Three ingredients: a gathering of faithful people, sharing the word of God, and practicing baptism and communion. That’s all it is. This means a church can meet anywhere, from our grand sanctuary in Indianapolis to a dingy apartment in Slovakia, and a church can be a tiny gathering or a group of thousands. It does not require a paid staff, a fancy choir, or a marketing strategy.

Distorted Images of the Church

Because the church is made up of fallible human beings, all biblical images of the church are subject to potential distortions. There is a very long, sad history of sin and evil in the church. The corruption is often covered up with pious language drawn from scripture. When we examine each image in this study, one important question to consider will be how the image might get misused to cover up or justify evil.

About This Study Guide

Each session features a selection of weekly readings. Some of the readings include other images that are related to the central image of the weekly session. An introduction and overview will help orient you to the readings, and a set of reflection questions will help you

take a deeper look at the various meanings of the image. Each session concludes with a focus on worship. Every Sunday you will be guided to experience the image through our worship services.

Pastor Darren
Lent 2025

SESSION 1: THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Introduction

Hanging above my couch is a photograph which will be 100 years old this August. It is a long, narrow photograph, about 3 feet long, of a congregation of children, youth, and adults sitting and standing in a grassy field.

The caption reads, “August 24-28, 1925, Mont Clair Community Festival.” Taped to the back is a newspaper article identifying the people as the members of the Maplewood Christian Church hosting a “Chautauqua.” A Chautauqua was named after the famed Christian campgrounds on Lake Erie that continues to host to this day a week-long festival of daily teaching sessions and nightly worship services. A hundred years ago, at its height, it inspired local churches around the country to create their own “Chautauquas.”

Among the participants is my great-grandmother, my grandfather as a teenager, and my great aunt and uncles as children. In this session we will examine the picture of the church as the people of God.

Do you have any church photos from the past in your home?

Weekly Readings

1 Peter 2:4-12

Deuteronomy 7:6-11

Isaiah 5:1-10

John 10:1-17

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Ephesians 2:11-22

Overview

Meanings of the Image

The image of the church as the people of God is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures' depiction of the Israelites and their covenant relationship with God, who delivered them from slavery in Egypt. God had chosen them to do God's special work and bear witness to God's truth among the nations. 1 Peter is applying this image to the church.

Like ancient Israel, the church is God's special people solely because of God's grace. There is nothing the church does or is that earns this status. Unlike Israel, the church's identity is not based on being a particular ethnicity or genealogy. Baptism replaces circumcision as the ritual identification because it can be universally applied.

Related Images

There are a cluster of other images that reflect the church as the people of God. Some of the related images are carryovers from the Hebrew scriptures, such as the church as God's elect, citizens of God's commonwealth, and exiles in a sinful world. These images play on the uniqueness of the church's identity.

There are other images that emphasize that the church's existence is dependent upon God, such as the fig tree, the olive tree, a vineyard, and a flock of sheep. These too are seen in the Old Testament.

There are some images of buildings which illustrate that the church is created by God. These include the church as a temple and a household. The church as the household of God goes beyond brick-and-mortar metaphors and encompasses family-like relations and even economic practices (because the household — not the market — was the primary economic unit in Greco-Roman society). And so, closely related to the people of God is the portrait of the church as the family of God, into which we are all adopted by grace. The plethora of these images are seen in Ephesians 2:11-22.

Church's Relationship to Society

Also, like ancient Israel, the church is chosen by God's love to perform a special task in society. This "mission" of the church will be examined closely in the upcoming sessions.

To do this divine work the church must be distinctive from society. The church is called out of the world's sin and evil so that it can have integrity in bearing witness for God in the world. This is not a withdraw from society, but rather as God's people we live by a different set of values. These values, at times, will compel the church to work in cooperation with other groups, religions, and organizations, while at the same time maintaining its unique identity. In other words, the church will be "peculiar," according to the King James translation of 1 Peter 2:9.

Reflection Questions

What makes us the people of God according to 1 Peter 2:10 and Deuteronomy 7:6-11?

How are we to behave as God's people, both in the world and with one another?

What makes the people of God unique? How are the people of God not unique among other groups and organizations?

What images does 1 Peter 2:11 use to describe the church's place in society, and what do these images mean?

The image of the church as the people of God comes from the Old Testament, where Israel is named the people of God. How do you understand the relationship between Christians and Jews today?

If the church is the people of God, what is God's relationship with folks who are not part of the church?

Worshipping With the People of God

Every time we worship we gather as the people of God. We express our collective identity through worship. Worship is not entertainment that an individual consumes nor a sport for which we are merely spectators. Because worship is a communal and participatory celebration of God's grace, we are formed into God's grace-filled people by worshipping together.

The sacrament of baptism is the premier act of worship that expresses our identity as the people of God. One of the essential meanings of baptism is that it is a spiritual rite of passage in which "we are initiated into Christ's holy church," as it says in the introduction for the ritual. When we are baptized we affirm our identity as the children of God, and when we baptize we are making a pledge to surround and support this person with God's grace. The entire ritual expresses that the church is God's people. (The baptismal rituals are found in the front of "The United Methodist Hymnal" on pages 33-54.)

As part of the sacrament, the people profess their collective faith by reciting the Apostles' Creed. Creeds and affirmations of faith are another way the church expresses its identity as God's people who have a particular worldview based on faith.

Profile of the People of God: The Confessing Church

When Hitler came to power, the Protestant church in Germany aligned itself with the Nazi Party. A minority movement called the Confessing Church rejected the Nazification of the church. In 1934 its members repudiated the absolute authority of the Fuhrer and affirmed their allegiance to Jesus Christ in the Barmen Declaration. They affirmed that faith in Christ and not ethnicity or national identity makes the church the people of God. However, over time their efforts diminished, and they did not publicly oppose the persecution of Jews. After the war ended the church issued the Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt in October 1945 as an admission of the church failing to act with integrity as God's people for the Jews, who are also the people of God.

Most poignantly we experience our identity as God's people by singing together. Congregational singing engages the head and the heart, and when we sing we are joined by our fellow members. Even though our individual voices may be weak and out of tune, we join with others in a communal celebration of God's love that makes us into a community of grace.

*This Sunday's
Worship Exercise:
Speak and Sing*

Say and sing aloud the prayers and hymns in worship. Don't just stand there. Open your mouth and make some noise. You don't have to be in tune. In fact, if you cannot sing, try humming along with the hymn.

When it comes to a unison prayer or responsive readings, say them aloud and let the experience of joining with others expand your faith perspective. When you actively participate in worship God can work in you to deepen and broaden your faith. The Spirit works through the people with whom we worship to bless us.

SESSION TWO: THE BOAT OF JESUS

Introduction

The symbol for the World Council of Churches (WCC) is a boat with a cross for its mast. In 1948 when the council officially formed it retrieved this ancient symbol of the church to express its common faith in Jesus Christ. Like the disciples who weathered a storm, the denominations and faith traditions that came together to form the WCC had just weathered the storm of World War II.

In this session we reflect on how the church is like a boat facing a myriad of challenges but finds its peace and direction from Jesus.

Have you ever been in a boat on rough waters?

Weekly Readings

Matthew 14:22-33

Mark 4:35-41

Genesis 6:8-19

1 Peter 3:18-22

1 Corinthians 3:10-23

1 Kings 8:22-30, 41-43

Overview

Meanings of the Image

The boat is a minor symbol for the church in the New Testament. We see it most clearly in Matthew, which is the only Gospel that uses *ekklesia* (usually translated “church” in Matthew 16:18 and 18:17).

The final version of Matthew, which we have in our Bibles, was completed at the turn of the first century during a time when the followers of Jesus were facing pressures from within Judaism as well as in society. Stories such as the disciples caught in a sea storm (Matthew 14:22-33) would have resonated with first century believers as an apt metaphor for what their little house churches were experiencing. They would have found hope in retelling how Jesus walked on water and calmed the seas for the church to survive, and for each member to find refuge in the fellowship of the congregation.

Related Images

Other biblical and historical images express the idea of the church as a safe place. Closely connected to the image of the boat, 1 Peter appropriates the Old Testament story of Noah’s ark (1 Peter 3:18-22).

The idea of protection is also implied in the biblical

Profile of the Boat of Jesus: Mother Bethel AME Church

In 1787 in Philadelphia, Black Methodist preacher Richard Allen led a group of Black members out of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in protest of their segregated worship.

Allen was one of the leaders of the Free Africa Society, a mutual aid society, that had purchased property on which had been a blacksmith shop. This became the site of Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, which has been a ship of Jesus' comfort and hope for over 200 years.

Dedicated in 1794, Mother Bethel gave birth to the first independent Black denomination in America. As a refuge for runaway slaves, it is said that there was a tunnel connecting Mother Bethel to a nearby Quaker meeting-house to assist the slaves' journey to freedom.

image of the church as a flock of sheep and Jesus the shepherd (e.g. John 10:11-15). Tracing the lines of metaphors even farther, there is the idea of the church as the temple of God where one finds a refuge from the world (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

Central to the image of the boat is the role of Jesus. In the story of the sea storm, Jesus commands the waves which threaten the boat. Jesus is both the mast that enables the boat to travel and the anchor that steadies the boat from drifting (Hebrews 6:19).

Church's Relationship to Society

The church as a ship says something about its precarious relationship with society. The church can face hard times in society that can even threaten its existence. Yet it means that a central mission of the church is to offer refuge and comfort for those who are struggling. The church is called to be a safe and healing place because Jesus can calm the storms we face.

Also, Jesus commands the church to rescue those who are perishing like a fishing boat that keeps trolling the waters with its fishing nets. This image of the church as a fishing boat forms a bookend in the Gospel story with Jesus calling the disciples to “fish for people” at the beginning, and after his resurrection giving the command to keep fishing (Mark 1:16-20 and John 21:1-8. We can see in John 21 how the writer moves from the image of fishing to the image of the church as a flock of sheep for Peter to care for in verses 15-19).

Reflection Questions

When has the church been a source of comfort and protection for you?

When have you seen or experienced a church not being a place of safety?

What “waves and storms” in society are threatening the church today?

How can we assist the church to be a place of comfort and protection for others?

How does worship help make the church into a place of God's care?

How might the image of the church as a boat be misunderstood by church members?

Worshipping in the Boat of Jesus

The image of the church as the boat of Jesus evokes the comfort, safety, and hope we find through worship. When we are struggling it is very tempting to withdraw from others. Trauma often isolates us from others. Worshipping draws us out of the isolation that perpetuates our anxieties and lifts us into God's hope because worship gets us out of our own thoughts.

Just as the disciples in Matthew's story worshipped Jesus on the boat, we find comfort and hope through acts of praise. Most notably we express this through canticles of praise. Also, the reading of scripture in worship replaces the negative loop our minds get stuck in.

Beyond the spoken word, the boat of Jesus is clearly experienced through the music we receive in worship. The prelude settles us on board the boat, the Spirit puts wind in the sails through the anthems, and the other pieces of service music are an anchor for our souls.

This Sunday's Worship Exercise: Listen

Pay attention and listen with your heart as well as your head in worship. Turn your phone off. Clear your mind and simply let the service lead you through the communal experience of grace. There is so much information coming at us throughout the week that worship provides an opportunity to hit the mute button. Because we are too easily distracted when we are alone, the act of worshipping together provides a guided context for you to open your heart and mind to the Spirit.

This Sunday, try to not think so hard and put aside everything that might distract you from encountering Christ in worship.

SESSION THREE: THE BODY OF CHRIST

Introduction

Sports journalist Joan Ryan explores team chemistry in her book, “Intangibles: Unlocking the Science and Soul of Team Chemistry.” Through her decade-long research, Ryan concludes that there is indeed “team chemistry,” and that it is the X factor for a winning season.

In this session, the Spirit of Christ creates the team chemistry that makes a congregation into “the body of Christ.”

Have you ever been part of a group that had “team chemistry?”

Weekly Readings

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Romans 12:1-8

Galatians 6:1-10

Colossians 1:18-29

John 15:1-17

Overview

Meanings of the Image

The church as the body of Christ plays a major role in Paul's letters. It conveys three things about the nature of the church.

One, it expresses the spiritual unity believers have with one another. This is an organic and deep unity, in contrast to a contractual relationship.

Two, it evokes our interdependence and the necessity to work together for a common purpose.

Three and most importantly, it affirms that our connection with one another is through the Spirit of Christ linking us from heart to heart. The accent mark of this metaphor is on "of Christ." Unlike all other organizations created by humans, the church is created and animated by Jesus Christ and as such, ultimately, has a divine origin. The imagery of the body of Christ makes the same point as the metaphor of the people of God: God alone is the source of life for the church.

Related Images

This "mystical union" (as it is called in some traditions,

including our Wesleyan tradition), is expressed in other, similar metaphors. We see this in the idea of the church as the branches of Jesus the vine (John 15). We also see the image of the church as communion, which will be discussed in the last session of this study. All these images highlight the themes of unity, interdependency, and spiritual dependency on Christ.

Church's Relationship To Society

Even though the body of Christ tends to focus our attention on the internal relations of the church, it implies a couple of key features about the church's relation-

Profile of the Body of Christ: Iona Community

In 1938 Church of Scotland minister George MacLeod led a group of pastors and laypersons to the isle of Iona to begin a decades-long process to rebuild the medieval abbey and revive Celtic spirituality through worship and peacemaking.

Today the Iona Community is a dispersed ecumenical network of small groups, mostly throughout Ireland and Great Britain. Members make a covenant to support and hold one another accountable around spiritual practices. In these house churches they are practicing church as the body of Christ.

The Iona Community continues to operate the abbey as a center of worship that has influenced worship around the world.

ship with society.

One, the church as the body of Christ continues Jesus' ministry of servanthood. The church is the hands and feet of Jesus through the ongoing power and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Two, if the church is united by one common faith in Christ, then the church transcends all national boundaries and ethnic divisions. All human marks of identity are secondary to our primary identity as members of the universal body of Christ. This is highlighted by our baptism. In baptism we celebrate our unity and identity in the Spirit and we pledge to put our allegiance to Christ first in our lives.

Reflection Questions

Compare and contrast how Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians uses the image of the church as the body of Christ.

What does the metaphor of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians and Ephesians tell us about the role of the Holy Spirit in the church?

Given all our differences, what unites Christians in John 15? What must we do to live into this unity, according to Romans 12 and Galatians 6?

What gets in the way of the church working together to be the hands and feet of Christ in mission to the world?

How has God used (or might want to use) your “spiritual gift” for building up the church?

How can you be supportive of other church members?

How might talk about us being the body of Christ foster arrogance or isolation from other people in society?

Worshipping as the Body of Christ

Much of what we have already examined about worship in the previous sessions applies to the church as the body of Christ.

There are two acts of worship that, literally, touch on what it means for us to be the body.

One, the passing of the peace expresses our connection with one another. Consider this: Passing the peace in worship is the only experience in our culture in which we meet one another simply as a fellow human being. All other forms of greeting are marked by exchanges, professions, or contests. In the body of Christ, all are equal because of God’s grace.

Two, passing the offering plate is the other, regular tangible act of worship we do every Sunday. In sharing our gifts — no matter how meager they may seem to us — we are expressing in a material way our unity as the body of Christ because our gifts are combined to support one another in doing the work of God.

This Sunday's Worship Exercise: Touch

Reach out and greet someone this Sunday. Pass the plate down the row. Do not be shy or embarrassed by it. Instead, begin to see what you do as one small part of our collective act of offering and of living at peace with one another.

Beyond passing the peace on Sunday morning, reach out to someone who has not been to church in a while. Extend the peace of Christ to them with a phone call, a message, or a visit. For many, many people, there are tragedies and struggles in their life right now that are preventing them from joining us at church. Instead of judging them or ignoring them, we must go to them. We must extend the hand of fellowship to them. Pass the peace beyond Sunday morning.

SESSION FOUR: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

Introduction

In the aftermath of disaffiliations, the United Methodist Church started a program called “Lighthouse Churches.” These congregations have committed themselves to welcoming persons who wish to remain United Methodists but who separated from their home churches that disaffiliated. The program’s title reflects the New Testament theme of the church being a witness of God’s light and love.

When have you experienced the church being an alternative to society?

Weekly Readings

Matthew 5:1-16

Isaiah 42:5-9

Philippians 2:12-18

Ephesians 5:6-20

1 John 1:5-10

1 Thessalonians 5:4-11

Overview

Meanings of the Image

The image of the church as God's light appears in Matthew, Acts, and the several New Testament letters. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us "the light of the world. (Matthew 5:14)" In his letters, Paul says that we are to "shine like stars in the world" (Philippians 2:15), and we are to live as "children of the light. (Ephesians 5:8)" Like the other metaphors, the church as light comes from Jesus Christ, who is the divine light (John 1:4, 9; 9:5). The church is only the light of the world as it reflects the light of Christ.

Christ and the church as the light of the world is rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. God the creator gave light to the world and God the deliverer led the Israelites through the wilderness with a pillar of fire. Isaiah makes much of Israel being God's light to the nations (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3), which is quoted in Acts as a description of the church (Acts 13:47).

Related Images

One can easily see how the church as light is comparable with other metaphors for the church. The unique relationship of the church to Christ as the divine light is the same as the church being God's people by virtue of God's grace. The church as the body of Christ in mission to the world has the same meaning as the church being the light to the world. Even the church as the sac-

ramental bread being broken and the wine being poured out for the world expresses a similar meaning about the church as Christ's light to society.

In Matthew, the image of the church as the light of the world is interwoven with the church as the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Both describe the church's relationship with the world and God's mission in society. However, the metaphor of salt may indicate God's end-time judgment of the world as expressed through the church.

Profile of the Light of the World: Burchell Baptist Church

Missionary and abolitionist Rev. Thomas Burchell founded Burchell Baptist Church in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1824. Most of the members were slaves and former slaves, including a deacon named Samuel Sharpe.

At the end of 1831 Sharpe led a peaceful general strike advocating emancipation, which was met with violent repression. Known as the Baptist War or the Christmas Rebellion, the church was burnt to the ground and Sharpe was hanged for being the light to the world.

However, that light continued to burn, and in 1833 the Parliament passed the Slavery Abolition Act, which resulted in the elimination of slavery from Jamaica in 1838.

Church's Relationship to Society

Of all the images, the church's mission is front and center in the idea of the church reflecting the light of Christ. "You are the light of the world" and not a light for its own internal functioning (Matthew 5:14).

The image of light tells us two things about the church's relationship with society. One, it expresses that the church must be proactive in reaching out to society with God's truth and love. Two, it evokes that the church must be distinctive from the values and practices of society.

Reflection Questions

How is our church the light of the world? How can we better reflect the light of Christ to the community?

In Matthew 5, the call to be the light of the world follows the Beatitudes (v. 3-12). What is the relationship between the Beatitudes and the church being the light of the world?

In Isaiah 42, what happens when the covenant people shine the light to the nations (v. 6-7)? Today, whose eyes need to be opened and who needs to be liberated? How does the church hide the light of Christ?

How can you "shine like a star" in your daily life, according to Philippians 2?

How does the church reflect the light of Christ in its internal practices and relationships as described in Ephesians 5 and 1 John 5?

How might the imagery of the church as light be misused by church leaders to hurt others?

Worshipping for the Light of the World

Candlelight has always been a feature of worship. Acolytes bring the light into the sanctuary symbolizing the presence of Christ, and the light is carried out of the sanctuary at the end of the service to symbolize our mission of sharing the light of Christ with the world.

In addition, we affirm that Christ is the divine light that illuminates our understanding and inspires our faith. We express this with a prayer for illumination before the first scripture reading.

This Sunday's Worship Exercise: Rededication

This Sunday rededicate your life to Christ. Begin your worship experience by asking God to show you what you need to start, restart, or refrain from doing as your personal act of commitment. Open your heart and mind to receiving God's calling for this moment in your life. Use the words of the hymns and liturgy as a personal act of rededication to being a bearer of the light of Christ to everyone you meet.

SESSION FIVE: THE MEAL OF THE LORD

Introduction

There is a row of church plates hanging on my dining room wall. Some are photographs and a couple of them are drawings of the buildings where my father-in-law took his first call, where I was baptized and preached my first sermons, and where I was appointed. As a kid we had church plates hanging in my mother's and grandmother's dining rooms. I liked them because they were decorative. And I always wondered why I couldn't eat off of them. My childhood desire expressed a theological insight that the church is the meal of the Lord.

What do you think or feel when you take communion?

Weekly Readings

Matthew 26:20-29

Mark 14:22-25

Luke 14:7-24

Luke 24:13-35

1 Corinthians 10:14-21

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Overview

Meaning of the Image

If you grew up Protestant, as I did, you tend to think of the Lord's Supper as merely a ritual of remembrance of Jesus' Last Supper and perhaps a symbol of his sacrifice on the cross. Whatever the historical meaning, we treat the sacrament as a personal, spiritual experience.

Our American individualism permeates the act of receiving communion. We assume that the word "communion" means we are only communing with God. And yet, we do it together. It is an act of worship that forms us into a congregation. As we commune with God, we are communing with one another.

In this session we will explore one of the essential meanings of the Lord's Supper — that we become the church through our participation in this sacrament.

Expressed in all the images for the church is the fundamental reality that what makes us the church is the grace of God, and grace is nothing less than the presence of the Spirit of the risen Christ in each of us connecting us with one another.

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament. A sacrament is a ritual that was enacted with Jesus that God uses as a means of grace. And so, when we take communion (trusting in the faithful presence of the Spirit of Christ) we are formed into the church — the body of Christ, the people of God.

More than the other images, the image of the church as the meal of our Lord is a metaphor we participate in. We enact the symbol when we take communion, and in doing it, the Spirit works in us and among us.

In 2008 the General Conference of the United Methodist Church adopted “This Holy Mystery,” our official teachings on the Lord’s Supper. It describes six major ideas expressed in the sacrament. One of those essential meanings is that communion is God’s means of grace that forms the church: “The one body, drawn together by the one Spirit, is fully realized when all its many parts eat together in love and offer their lives in service at the Table of the Lord.”

Sounds weird, doesn’t it? That’s because we are too wrapped up in our modern, rationalistic worldview. We have lost a sense of mystery and wonder. We have abandoned a belief in our collective identity as the church.

Church’s Relationship to Society

The church as the table of the Lord has implications on the church’s relationship to society. When we receive the Holy Spirit through the sacrament we take on the mission of Christ to the world. We are united and empowered to do the work of God in bringing love, justice, and peace to society. As the prayer for communion (known as “The Great Thanksgiving”) says,

“Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here, and on

Profile of the Table of the Lord: Shitsu and Ono Catholic Churches

Christianity came to Japan in the mid-1500s and went underground during the persecution of Christians at the beginning of the 17th century. To sustain their faith in secret, they turned the tea ceremony into a communion-like service by turning the teacups three times prior to drinking to symbolize the Trinity. It was a ritual that held them together for generations.

With the change of political and international climates, Christians came out of hiding in 1865 in what is known as “the Discovery of the Faithful” with the reintroduction of Catholic priests from the West. As part of this reemergence, two catholic churches were constructed in Shitsu and Ono where the descendants of the hidden Christians worship today.

these gifts of bread and wine. Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ, that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood.”

Just as the bread is broken and the cup poured out, so too are we broken and poured out in service to the world. “This Holy Mystery” explains this:

“The sacraments are God’s gifts to the gathered body of believers to form the church into Christ’s body in ministry to the world. Through Holy Communion, the Holy Spirit works to shape our moral and ethical lives. In the

ongoing process of conversion, we grow in personal and social holiness and are empowered to work for healing, compassion, reconciliation, justice, and peace.”

The invitation to the Lord’s Supper expresses the inclusive nature of the church. In the United Methodist Church, all are welcome by faith to participate in the Lord’s Supper. The sacrament is truly a communion that defies the prejudice that is in the world, and creates an alternative community of love.

Reflection Questions

Is taking communion meaningful for you? If so, how? If not, why?

What was the problem(s) with the way the Corinthians were practicing the Lord’s Supper? What can we learn from their mistakes about how to be the church today?

How do you think Jesus felt at his last supper as described by Matthew? How do churches today betray Christ?

What does the Parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14 teach us about how to be the church?

What do the two disciples realize when they eat dinner in Luke 24? How does the sacrament help us see Christ in our fellowship with one another?

The Lord's Supper is a sacrament and as such it is a means of God's grace for us. How can the church be a sacrament, a channel of God's grace, to others?

Worshipping at the Table of the Lord

The communion prayer for the Lord's Supper is called "The Great Thanksgiving." It expresses that the church today is incorporated into God's history and story of grace that stretches back through Israel to the beginnings of creation. (You can find it in the front of the United Methodist Hymnal, page 9-10.) It also expresses how we participate in God's grace through the presence of the Holy Spirit. It evokes our mission and witness for Christ that the sacrament inspires, and empowers us to perform.

Because we need the constant presence of the Spirit and are called to perpetually do the work of Christ, you cannot ruin the meaning of the sacrament by taking it too often. You can only ruin it if you do not partake of it with faith.

This Sunday's Worship Exercise: Taste

This week, eat and drink the bread of life and the cup of salvation on Sunday morning or at one of our Lenten Wednesday morning communion services. Do not just go through the motions. Instead, receive the elements with an open mind about the mystery of God's grace. Taste and swallow it with a hungry heart for the love of Christ that satisfies our souls.

A GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUP LEADERS

Congratulations! You have been chosen to lead a small group of “Peculiar People: What It Means to Be the Church.” As the facilitator, you do not need to know everything — or anything! You don’t need to have the answer or any special training or skills. All you need to do is use this step-by-step guide to help your group discuss the session’s topic. And if they get off topic, that is OK! The times listed below are guidelines if you want to keep the meeting to 60 minutes. So, thank you for your willingness to serve!

Step One: Checking In (5-10 minutes)

Spend a few minutes allowing everyone to share what has been happening in their lives over the past week.

Step Two: Centering Prayer

Ask everyone to center themselves in the presence of God by doing one of the following centering prayers:

Option 1—Spend 2 minutes in silence. At the end of the time, simply say, “Amen.”

Option 2—Read the opening prayer from this Sunday’s bulletin, either in unison or ask someone to read it.

Option 3—Invite everyone, as they are led, to offer an informal prayer. Say, “Let us pray,” and then

allow for plenty of silence for anyone to share a prayer. Then, conclude the time with your own short prayer (or you can use the opening prayer from Sunday's bulletin).

Step Three: Discussion (40 minutes)

Option A: Read the primary Sunday lesson (which are the first scripture lessons for each session). Read one of the reflection questions to begin the discussion. If the discussion never returns to the other questions, that is OK. But if the discussion gets off track or comes to an end, read another question to direct the conversation.

Option B: Read (or have someone read) the overview and then read a lead question to get the discussion started.

Step Four: Closing (5-10 minutes)

A. If your group is using a different facilitator each week, assign next week's facilitator.

B. Read this blessing:

*May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you and remain with you always. Amen.*

C. Pass the peace of Christ to one another.

Upcoming Services

Ash Wednesday, March 5, 7:30 a.m., 1 p.m.,
6:30 p.m.

Weekly Communion During Lent, Wednes-
days, March 12-April 16, 7:30 a.m.

Palm Sunday, April 13, 8:30 and 11 a.m.

Holy Thursday, April 17, 7:30 p.m.

Good Friday, April 18, 12 and 7:30 p.m.

Easter Sunday, April 20, 8:30 and 11 a.m.

*Join us each Sunday for worship
services at 8:30 and 11 a.m. and
Sunday school at 9:45 a.m.!*

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