

HOW (NOT) TO GO TO CHURCH

On repositioning the church in society

Luke 10:1-12

Irene and I have had great fun traveling in Europe.
We've been lucky enough to do it a couple times recently,
thanks to a daughter living there.
I like lots of things about travel in Europe.
But at the top of the list, are the cathedrals.

The architecture of European cathedrals is awe-inspiring.
The art takes my breath away.
The acoustics are sensational.
The sheer permanence of these ancient buildings is *amazing*.
It's hard to describe the feeling of standing inside a church
that started to be built almost 800 years ago,
took 600 years before it was finished,
and was the tallest building in the world,
until the Washington Monument passed it.
That was our experience in the Cologne cathedral in Germany.

You don't have to know one whit about Christianity or church history.
You just take one look at these buildings and you know,
whatever went on in there, was the most important thing in society.
You know without doubt, just by looking with your eyes,
that the church stood at the very center of civilization.
It's rather mind-boggling for a 21st-century American.

This age when the church was the center of power and influence
is long gone.
It was called Christendom.
Christendom is dead in Europe; *nearly* dead in North America.
Which is a good thing, in my opinion,
but I'll get to that in a minute.

There are still signs and symbols of Christendom,
everywhere we look . . . even here at *our* building.
Christendom assumes
that the church is the hub of both culture and community . . .

that everyone understands and speaks the language of Christianity. . .
that everyone knows what the cross stands for . . .
what baptism means . . .
what the Bible says about Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Paul.

In Christendom, the mindset of the church is,
if you build it, they will come.
In Christendom, when all is said and done,
the church is a place to go to.

Why *else* were churches always built in prominent locations?
In early American towns, the church always got the prime spot.
The top of the hill.
And with the help of a steeple, it's visible for miles.
You know how it is, driving north on Park Road through EMU,
before the road takes a slight bend to the right,
you look straight down the road,
and directly in your line of vision is the Park View steeple.
I doubt that's a coincidence.
That steeple says something intentional to this community.
It says, "Here is the church."
"Here is where you come if you want Christian worship,
or Christian fellowship,
or want to hear a sermon,
or want some other Christian goods and services."
"This is where it's happening."
That's not a criticism of our church.
It's just what churches have been long trained to do.
It's the way we've been conditioned to think
in a culture of Christendom.
Church is a place.
And it's a place you need to go to.

Now, there's nothing wrong with churches establishing a location.
If I thought that, I wouldn't *be here*.
There's nothing wrong with advertizing our presence,
trying to be visible, trying to attract visitors.
If I thought that, I wouldn't care about having
well-planned worship services,
or well-staffed nurseries,

or well-lit parking lots.
If I thought that,
no one would be hearing my voice on the radio right now.
No, we want to be seen and heard and visited, and rightfully so.

But, are we really satisfied holding on to a notion
that church is *mainly* a place to go to?
I wonder . . . when Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out
into all the world, and share the good news, and baptize,
and form communities of disciples,
who would join God's new covenant community . . .
I wonder if he ever envisioned a church building
that would take 600 years to construct,
and stand 500 feet tall.
I wonder if he envisioned spending \$95 million
to remodel a basketball stadium into a megachurch.

I'm not knocking church buildings.
Really. I'm not knocking the church as an institution.
Church buildings and church institutions
have made lots of wonderful things possible.
The best music and art this world has known,
would not *exist*, were it not for Christendom's cathedrals.

But I also think we need to think long and hard
about what happens when a church pays so much attention,
and so much money and time and other resources
to grow its own structures and programs and personnel,
and be driven by its own agenda,
and pursue it's own success.

The church works for God.
God wants to transform and recreate the world.
But to do that, *God needs the church!*
It sounds preposterous for me to say it.
"God *needs* the church."
Isn't God all-powerful?
Can't God act without us?

Well . . . let's back up a bit.
The world and everything in it, was created
whole and beautiful and good,
as God willed it.
And God willed it to *stay* that way,
in harmony with itself and with God
and with all other parts of creation.
God willed community.
God willed love and relationship.
God wanted us to trust God, to depend on God,
to worship and love him,
because God so loved us, his creation.
But there *cannot be love without freedom*.
So God sacrificed his control for the sake of his love.
God was willing to risk rejection
in order to take a chance on being in relationship.

But we abused that freedom.
We did not trust God sufficiently.
We chose to be masters of our own destiny.
We acted violently toward others.
And destroyed the very community God willed.
After the sixth day of creation, Genesis 1:31 says,
God saw the earth and all he created,
and said "It is very good."
But the world is no longer what God saw at creation.
In fact, just a few chapters later God saw something quite different:
Genesis 6:12—"And God saw that the earth was corrupt."

God still, even *today*, wills creation to be restored.
God wills community.
God wills love and harmony and trust and intimacy between
himself and all creation,
and between created things.

That is the mission of God. That is the sole passion of God.
I don't know any other conclusion that scripture allows.
God wants this sin-filled and broken creation to be saved and redeemed.
God wants the good harmonious creation to be restored.

And to bring it about, God needs the church.
God needs a people,
because—and this is *key*—God is determined
to bring about his will without coercion,
without violence,
without destroying the freedom that makes love possible.
If God reached into this world and single-handedly made things right,
fixed all creation and all people by a flick of the wrist,
it would violate the freedom essential for love.
If God is love, then we must be free.

So in God's strange and infinite wisdom,
God chose a particular people, at a particular time and place.
And God invited this people—
I'm talking about the children of Abraham—
to be a public witness to the nations.
They were to live in a community of love and trust and harmony
that demonstrated the beauty God willed for all peoples.
And thereby the nations would see, and be fascinated by,
and drawn non-violently into God's will.
And they would still be free.
That's why we have that biblical image of all the nations
streaming toward the mountain of the Lord, Mt. Zion,
where the people of God live.
It's not that Israel or any other people God chose
would dominate and forcibly rule the nations.
No, the nations would be drawn
to what God was doing among these people.
The way it works is,
the people live and embody the will of God in community,
and the world watches, sees, is drawn to the ways of God.

So God needs a people.
God first called Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants,
to be that public witness to God's will.
And because of Jesus, whom God sent to establish a new covenant,
we carry on that call—that awesome, and humbling,
and fearful and formidable call.
To be God's people in the world.

To be a public witness to all the nations.
God needs the church.

Now . . . I hope I didn't lose you in the underbrush,
as we hacked our way through that theological woods.
But it is critical that we get it.
It's not only the foundation for this whole worship series,
it's essential for understanding what kind of church
God wants us to be.

Let me sum it up in a few simple words.
God is love. God created this world, and us, in love.
Because God loved us, he gave us freedom.
We abused the freedom.
Creation became wounded and broken and alienated by sin.
So God's mission is to recreate and restore the world,
and still do so with love and freedom.
So God needs a people, a community.
God needs the church
to be a free and loving and non-violent
public witness to a watching world.
A witness to God's character and will,
a witness to God's salvation.
As imperfect as we are, God is depending on us
to be God's agents of world reconciliation.

If we stop to think about that long enough,
it turns the agenda of most churches upside-down.

This is a world full of pain and brokenness and loneliness and
sin and alienation and violence.
God loves this world and is on a mission to save it.
And God called the church into being for the sole purpose
of joining with God in that mission.
That is why we are called the body of Christ.
This body image we love so much is not just a picture
of how well we fit together and are connected as a group.

The body of Christ is not a body for the sake of the body.
The body of Christ is to be a *literal* body—here, in the flesh—
the presence of God in the world.
Jesus gave us the same work *he* was given.
Jesus incarnated—en-fleshed—embodied,
the real presence of God to 1st-century Palestine.
Our ministry is *still* one of incarnation.
This body of Christ, the church, is to be the embodiment
of God’s saving and healing presence,
out and among the broken world.

Congregations are trained to think of their physical location,
their buildings, their staff, their ministry programs,
as the center of all the action.
Some of them even call their buildings “ministry centers.”
Wow! That’s pretty bold.

We think this is where it’s at.
So, we think we are being missional,
if we get really good at getting people to come here,
into our place, on our terms, at our appointed times.
We adopt a market mentality as a congregation.
Success is measured in how many human bodies
we get to walk through our doors,
and how many dollars get put into our budget.
It becomes a competition, like it or not, with other churches.
We start thinking that outreach means good advertizing.

But when a church doubles in Sunday morning attendance in one year,
that’s no evidence that it’s being missional.
Not in the least.
It’s a sign that it’s doing a very good job of attracting people
into its program and physical plant.

God’s mission, remember, is to restore the broken,
to save the alienated,
to reconcile the estranged,
and redeem those held captive by sin.
Evidence that a church is being missional

is that it’s deeply connected to the people around it
that God desires to save.
A missional church is concerned first and foremost,
about incarnating, embodying,
the love of God in the lives of its neighbors.

Sure, a church that is engaged in the mission of God will *also*, likely,
be attractive to some, perhaps to many.
But that is not the point. That is a potential by-product.

It’s this incarnation
that lies at the heart of today’s gospel story in Luke 10.
Jesus sent his disciples out into the surrounding villages
with the good news that God’s kingdom was near.
Their mission was a far cry from the mission of most congregations.
Jesus’ disciples went empty out into the world—
no moneybag, no sandals, nothing.
They made themselves vulnerable.
They made themselves dependent upon those they ministered to.
They lived out the reality of God’s kingdom
in the midst of places of need.
They were God’s hands and God’s feet,
and God’s mouth and God’s heart.
They were practicing incarnational ministry.

Congregations have a choice.
They can orient themselves around attraction—
and this is what the vast majority of American congregations do,
I’m afraid.
We can position ourselves as the “best church to go to,”
and work really hard, and effectively,
at attracting the most people to our “ministry center.”
One church in Orlando puts out ads saying, “Come to ABC Church.
Our worship is awesome, and our ministries are second to none.”

Or,
congregations can orient themselves around incarnation.
We can recognize that our primary task
is to be the literal body of Christ,

to embody a healing God in a wounded world.
We can orient our priorities around the question
of how much time, attention, people, and money
are being invested in the lives of our neighbors,
and strangers and aliens . . . and systems . . .
in the community around us?
versus how much is being invested at our own location,
and the religious activities that take place here?

Like I said,
there is nothing wrong with being attractive as a congregation.
I *want* us to value people who come to us.
I *want* us to give ourselves, even sacrificially,
to welcome those who come.
I *want* our doors to be open . . . *wide* open.
We must learn and practice habits of friendliness and hospitality.

But we cannot let attraction be the tail that wags the dog.
Otherwise, we've sold out to the consumerism and individualism
that controls our culture.
"Come to the church with the biggest and the most."
"Come to the church that will meet your needs the best."
"Come to the church that has ministries second to none."

It is not our mission at Park View Mennonite Church
to convince people to "go to church" here.
The mission of this church is God's mission.
Our mission is to embody
the loving and saving presence of the living God
precisely in those places in our community and in our world
that God *most* wants to save.
The places in the shadows that many of us like to avoid.
Or the neighbors down our street who we have never met.

We were not called into this faith community
known as Park View Mennonite Church,
so we could "go to church."
We were called to "be the church."
Being the church, includes, of course,

regularly and frequently gathering as a community
to serve God together in acts of worship,
to care for each other,
to nurture and challenge and support each other.
That *is* a priority.
But we cannot truly be the church,
unless all those acts of ministry are aimed toward
sending us out these doors
to embody the love and presence of God in this world.

Let's move beyond being church-goers.
Let's be the people God needs in this world we see out our windows.
And let's join together in a prayer exercise, as Bonnie leads us.

—Phil Kniss, September 7, 2008