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What's Right with the Church?

I Peter 2:4-10

We hear and read many disparaging things about the church. The media is filled with stories of sexual scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, in evangelical circles, in Mormon life, and in the midst of Baptist life as well. We are all aware of the disruptions within our own denomination. My father, my uncle, and I all served on the faculties and staffs of seminaries that were taken over by fundamentalist forces. This church and North Carolina Baptists are well aware of the issues that have torn Southern Baptist life apart. It is a deep pain for many of us, for nothing cuts as deeply as broken stained glass. There is declining participation in church life all across America. Since 1960 membership in mainline Protestant churches has declined by over 25%. Most Baptist churches are declining or plateaued in their attendance. In addition, there is a crisis in ministry as both the number and quality of clergy is problematic as never before. If reflective of other professions, 25% of clergy should be below the age of 35, but that is not the case. Only 4% of Episcopalian clergy are below the age of 35, for Lutherans that percentage is 6%, for Presbyterians 7% and for Baptists 11%. The church appears morally bankrupt, culturally backward, and old.

We should mention a clear caution here: not all is dismal. There are islands of strength and many examples of vibrant hope abounding. But let's face it, there is a crisis in the modern church and we need to ask: what in the world are we doing here? There is a further caution: the very values we use in judging the church are values taught to us by the church. Our very criticism is empowered by the church itself through its witness in the past.

Our purpose this morning is not to focus on what is wrong. Rather, I wish to speak a strong word of affirmation and love for the Church of Jesus Christ. Taking a cue from Will Willimon's book of several years ago, I want to talk about "What's Right with the Church?" Before asking what's right with the church, however, we need to ask what the church is. The movie "Reds" tells the story of the radical Jack Reed. In one scene he turns to his companion and pleads, "I've decided to move to New York and I want you to come with me." She replies, "What as?" He doesn't understand, "What as, what do you mean, what as?" She answers, "What as? As your lover, as your paid companion, as a friend, as a fellow writer, as an artist? What as?" Exasperated Jack shouts, "You can put on a costume and come dressed as a kangaroo for all I care, just come." She insists on asking, "I need to know, what as." We too need to ask as we consider the church, what as? What is it really?

To discover the real identity of the church let's ask what does it do? What does it look like in real life? What is the Church? The answer comes as we discover the mission of the Church. The Church is not so much a structure but rather a mission. The church is missional. Where there is no mission, there is no church. Mission is a part of the Old Testament covenant response to God. The church is called by God. It is called out of the world, only to be sent back into the world in service.

What is the mission? WITNESS. Witness is a primary mission of the Church in all situations. Christ promises the first disciples, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, and to the ends of the earth. And what is that witness? That Jesus is the resurrected Christ. That Jesus was born and lived among us. That Jesus died and was resurrected. That Jesus will return. That Jesus' life and death teaches us that God would rather die than stop loving us.

What is the mission? SERVICE. There is no possibility of separating Christian witness from Christian service. The witness to the Christ, who is the suffering servant of God, draws each of Christ's disciples into the costly expression of service to the world in need.

What is the mission? FELLOWSHIP. The unity of God with Jesus Christ is to be duplicated in the unity of the Church, not just for the sake of unity within the church, but as a sign to the world. What is the church? Those called and chosen by God as witnesses, serving the world and living in fellowship with God and God's people.

Having talked of the meaning of the Church, let's turn to the question of what's right with the church. Given the fact of the church's history of misdeeds, our continuing disappointment in the church, and the church's inexcusable treatment of so many, why stay? Hans Kung, the modern-day Catholic theologian, asks exactly this same question after delivering a frontal attack against the church and detailing its many shortcomings. He writes:

Then why stay? Because, despite everything, in this community of faith we can affirm a great history in which we live with so many others. Because, as members of this community, we ourselves are the church and should not confuse it with its machinery and administrators. Because, however serious the objections, we have found here a spiritual home in which we can face the great questions of the whence and whether, the why and wherefore, of persons and the world.

So, from my experience, let me mention some things that are right about the church.

What's right about the church? Not everything but here I meet God, in worship, Bible study, prayer, and service. Christianity is a communal event. You cannot come to Christ without holding your brother and sister by the hand. Scripture tells us where two or three are gathered, there is Christ. Not that God isn't found in our moments of isolation and aloneness, but here in the fellowship of the church, God's presence is especially nurtured and made available. As a young seminary student I asked a friend to come to listen and critique the sermons I was presenting to a church where I had just been hired as the associate pastor. I pictured myself as the fiery young prophet castigating the church members for all of their shortcomings. After hearing me preach on a few occasions, my friend sat me down and said, "Tom, you really don't like these people do you?" I learned to like them, when instead of seeing myself as a minister over against them or above them, I finally came to see us all as wounded healers in need of one another. Here I find a community where God is present.

What's right with the church? Not everything, but here I find fellowship to nurture and sustain me. Biblical scholar and preacher, Fred Craddock, tells the story of his father who didn't go with the family to church. Fred's mother took the children to church and Sunday school; his father didn't go at all. He would simply complain about Sunday dinner being late. Whenever the preacher would call or come by, his father would always say, "I know what the church wants. The church doesn't care about me. The church just wants another name, another pledge, another name, another pledge." "Another name another pledge," that's what he always said. At revival time the pastor would bring the traveling evangelist by the house as if to say, "There's another one, now go and sic him, get him." Fred's father would always respond, "The church really doesn't care about me. The church just wants another name, another pledge." Fred said he heard his father say it a thousand times. There was one time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital. Having lost most of his weight he was down to 73 pounds. They had taken out his throat. They put in a metal tube, and x-rays had burned him to pieces. Fred flew in to see him. His father couldn't speak and his father couldn't eat. When Fred entered the hospital room he looked around and there were plants and flowers everywhere and a stack of cards almost 2 feet high beside his bed. All the flowers around his bed, every card, every plant, were from persons or groups in the church. Fred's father

saw him as he started to read some of the cards and notes. His father could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story." Fred asked, "What is your story, Daddy?" And his father wrote, "I was wrong." Here I find a fellowship that nurtures me.

What's right with the church? Not everything, but here I find challenge to my way of living. Here I am confronted with the word that calls me to change. Almost exactly 40 years ago in April of 1968, I was a student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. Following the death of Martin Luther King in nearby Memphis, the city of Nashville was torn apart by riots. Buildings were burned, shots were fired, there were tanks in the street, and I was scared. Will Campbell was a leader of the civil rights forces in middle Tennessee and was invited by our campus chaplain speak on Sunday morning at the University Chapel. The sophisticated and smug students filled the sanctuary that morning ready to hear Will Campbell tear into the ignorant bigots and racists of that city. Will certainly spoke a strong word for justice and equal rights, but I was astounded when he turned to the students and said, "If you haven't learned to show God's love to a red neck Klansman you haven't learned what Christ's love is all about." That was just like the time when John Killinger preached a sermon at First Presbyterian Church in Lynchburg, Virginia where he served as pastor. Lynchburg was the home of Jerry Falwell and the base for his television ministry, "The Old Time Gospel Hour." John presented a sermon entitled, "Would Jesus Christ Ever Appear on the Old Time Gospel Hour?" He went into all the reasons that Jesus Christ would be very uncomfortable with Jerry Falwell and his TV broadcast. But then he concluded his sermon by saying to the congregation, you know Jesus would be very uncomfortable to be with us at First Presbyterian Church this morning as well. Here I find challenge to my comfortable and unquestioning way of living.

What's right with the church? Not everything, but here I find the place where our faith tradition is passed on to the next generation. Historically, as children are born and as they begin to grow, that's when parents will join the church and become active. The religious experience and training available to our children is important for their maturity. Having reached a level of religious sophistication, we tend to think that no one needs to spend time learning Bible verses, taking Bible stories seriously, and confusing true faith with childlike religion. Carroll Lytch, a leading authority on faith development in children and youth, comments that a great deal of our problem in the demise of the church today has been our inattention to religious training for our youth. You just can't jump to a stage of advanced theological reflection without the stages of faith development that travel through the very concrete experiences of childhood faith. So we laugh at our silly sword drills, our childish daily Bible readings, and our trite memorized prayers. But there is a cost in doing that. You can't sustain sophisticated faith without the rubrics of elementary religious experience. It's a process of development in which the church plays the central role. Here I find the necessary foundation for faith's development that begins with care for our children.

What's right with the church? Not everything, but here I find in the midst of all of its problems, a force for reform so much needed in our world today. The African American church stands as the prime example of the church speaking truth against the abuse of power and it has brought about a dramatic change in the life of our nation during our lifetime. The social service web of our nation -- schools, hospitals, childcare agencies, homeless shelters -- these all started as an outgrowth of the ministry of the Church. The forces for reform and community care are still alive in the church, even as these programs have long since found other social allies. Here I find a much needed force for reform in our nation.

What's right with the church? Let me answer that very personally. Over the years as a Baptist minister my life has been threatened, my car has been sabotaged, my publications have been shredded, I have been investigated by the so-called peace committee, the institution where I taught was taken over by

fundamentalists, and both my father and uncle could tell something of the same story. So why stay? Because here, here in the church, I have found a spiritual home. Here I have experienced the love of Jesus Christ.

What's right with the church? Not everything, but here I find a beacon of hope in the midst of a hurting world. In the spring of 1973 I was in graduate school in New Haven Connecticut and working on a project related to the Christian-Marxist dialogue. One of my professors, Jaroslav Pelikan, knew of my interest and invited me to come and meet the editor of the most widely read newspaper in all of Poland. Eager to meet a Communist Party official or perhaps a key governmental leader, I gladly accepted his invitation to meet that afternoon at a reception in the graduate lounge. Imagine my surprise when I arrived and saw no government official, no army officer, and no communist leader. There was my professor standing beside an older gentleman in clerical garb, a Roman Catholic priest. Now understand, this was long before we had ever heard of the Solidarity Movement or ever hoped realistically for the downfall of the Iron Curtain. I was stunned. As the priest spoke to the group that afternoon, he spoke not of persecution or difficult times. No, he spoke a word of hope and confidence. He referred to the story of Jesus on the Sea of Galilee in a boat with his disciples when a terrible storm came up. The disciples were terrified; they felt they would all drown. Then priest reminded us, that was all there was of the Christian Church at that time, riding in the small, storm tossed boat. The boat did not sink because Christ was there. The church did not sink because Christ was there. Neither will Christ's church in our world sink. What's right with the church? Not everything, but most importantly, we know that Christ is here. We are God's own people called to be the servants of God. The question for us this morning, are we on board?