

We Believe: God's People Together

Matt 5:13-16; Eph 2:13-22

Good morning! It is wonderful to get to worship together again. I am so grateful to all of the people who have been investing their time, talent, equipment, and creativity to enable this to happen. I can't imagine what it would be like to not get to worship together. I love that you are interacting in the comments on Facebook—keep doing that! It is kind of like the coffee hour or passing the peace. Thank you for joining us today!

Last Sunday as I was leaving after worship, I came across a man who was out in front of our building taking pictures. He seemed so sad and anxious. He asked me if I thought this was the end times. I told him I didn't think it was, and that I believe after a while things will get back to normal. "But why would heavenly Father let all the churches be closed?" he asked, with pain in his voice. "We aren't closed" I said, "we are worshipping online. You can join us if you can get on the internet." Really!?! He said, a little hope returning. It does feel strange to have our church building closed. It is pretty much an empty building these days. Normally we have bible studies, prayer meetings, committee meetings, counseling sessions, groups making food for others, Scout meetings, support groups coming together, and of course Sunday School classes, youth group meetings and most of all—worship. I'm so proud that normally—in the "before times" as a friend of mine calls them-- you share this amazing resource that is our building with the community and how you use it as a launching pad for so many great ministries.

But right now—none of that is happening—at least not physically in the building. Incredibly—almost ALL of those things are still happening right now, they are just spread out. The church is not closed! Our *building* is closed. But the church isn't shut down at all. First Presbyterian is deployed, out in the field! Bible studies, prayer groups, meetings, ALL of those things are happening online. Our worship is online, consistent with the governor's proclamation. But the people doing the worshipping are spread all over. Last week I know of people joining us from Texas to Washington to Illinois! According to Facebook, last week's worship services

reached over 1500 people! And over 400 of you interacted with the two worship services. Praise God!!

The church is not a place. It is not a building. It is not an institution. It is not the pastors. The church is --- A PEOPLE! The church is always a group of people. We can't be closed down. As long as YOU—the church-- are acting, the church is acting.

We are in a series called We Believe, looking at the heart of our Christian faith. Today we are talking about the church. The church is not an optional extra to faith, it is essential. It is the place where faith is lived out. Pastor Eugene Peterson says that the church is the context where we grow up to Christian maturity. He says there is no other place to be a Christian except the church. Peterson is saying you can't be a lone ranger Christian. The church is God's plan for the world. The local church—groups of people like us—are the hope of the world. There is no plan B. We are how God chooses to reach out in love to this broken, hurting, frightened world. The early church was just small groups meeting in homes—God is not stopped at all by how we are worshiping today!

The key take away today is that the church is 1) God's people 2) United by Jesus, 3) living out God's rescue mission to the world. We are God's people, united, sent to serve our neighbors.

The New Testament word for church is Ecclesia. Ecclesia. That means a gathering or an assembly. It always means a group of people. It is not a word for a building, it is a word for a group of people. Literally ecclesia means “called out ones.” Called out ones—you, the church, are the people God has called out so that we can join in his rescue plan. Being part of the church, being a follower of Jesus, means having a role to play to help other people. We are blessed to be a blessing. That has been God's plan from the very beginning. As Bible scholar Ben Myers puts it, “God's plan of salvation all along has been to create one human society as the bearer of the divine image. The church isn't just the way people respond to salvation; the church *is* salvation.”

When I was little I remember learning a little hand game. Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people! I enjoyed that little game. But it reinforces a false view of what the church is. Don't let the “here is the church” game mix you up—we don't go to church. We don't *have* a church. We ARE the Church! Here is the church! (wiggling fingers) We love getting to be together in person, but we will keep on getting together on the

phone and online and talking at a safe distance until this crisis is passed. We are still and always the church. In some ways, I feel like we are doing a better job of being the church right now than we often do. We've been able to call and check in with everyone in our directory almost weekly. That is amazing! We are actively finding ways to serve and help our neighbors, even while staying home. Yes! Church, that is what we are called to do.

Please understand—we stay home right now not out of fear, but because of love. Love keeps us home. The way to love and protect people today is by staying home. And as we stay home out of love, we reach out with love in all the ways we can—deliveries of meals or groceries, phone calls, skype sessions, Facebook Live—whatever works!

The Bible uses several images to describe God's people—the Body of Christ, the family of God, even the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The Church is a *living* building! Listen to the Message translation of those last verses from Ephesians 2: “God is building a home. He is using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.” All of us together are the temple where God lives. Church isn't someplace you go, it is something you ARE.

The Apostles' Creed has been guiding us in this series. It says that we believe in the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints. The word catholic there means universal. We believe that Jesus has ONE church. It is the *universal* church—it includes everyone following his way, all who are trusting him for rescue. Jesus' church isn't limited by borders or culture or gender or even by death! We are connected to the believers who went before us—that is what the communion of saints is about. Jesus' church is truly universal, through all of time and space. Regardless of denomination, we are ALL part of Jesus' universal (or catholic) Church.

That big family of God, the one Church, is united by Jesus, even though it includes all kinds of people from every possible group. We are united by Jesus. Jesus is our peace. That is what our Ephesians reading is about. He combines groups that are used to being in conflict into one new humanity. And Jesus is still doing that today. He combines Democrats and Republicans. He combines Trumpers and Bernie fans. Not for a fight but to be one body together! Being the church is our primary identity. It comes before nation, before party, before

career, even before family—the fundamental truth about you is that Jesus loves you—he is crazy about you—and he is building you into his home, adopting you into his family.

Father Greg Boyle is a Roman Catholic priest. He kept having to do funerals for the children in his community in Los Angeles—deaths from drugs and gang violence. Father Greg believed that his job was to show up in that dangerous, violent neighborhood—full of people very different from him—and be the church. He started going out into the streets—riding around on his bicycle—trying to negotiate truces, going to the hospital with people when they were injured, and waging peace. He saw that people needed a pathway out of gangs and drugs. Eventually he started HomeBoy Industries which is now the largest gang intervention, rehab and reentry program in the world. Father Greg treats the “homies” like equals and offers them respect and a path forward. Through Father Greg, God has created a place where gang bangers and peaceful citizens, where crips and bloods, where criminals and victims all have learned to be reconciled to each other. Through Jesus they are made one family. Jesus is their peace. Father Greg likes to say that the thing that connects them is their kinship—being in Jesus’ family together. It is not a relationship based on the “haves” giving to the “have-nots,” but a relationship built on people being family and enjoying being together. That is what the church is called to be. Jesus reconciles us to himself and to each other. Think of someone or some group you would be uncomfortable with in our church. Those are the people Jesus is calling us into relationship with. Start praying that he will be your peace, even with *those* people. The church is a place where people are united instead of divided. Our world is so quick to divide and to choose up sides today. Friends, we are called to live differently. To be united in Jesus and to reach across those divisions with love and kinship, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says you are the salt of the earth, you are the light of world. By the way—that is a plural “you”—ALL you all are the Salt of the earth! This is something that we ARE, not something that we try to be. As members of Jesus’ body on earth we are, together, salt and light. Jesus is describing how we already are, not giving us something to work towards.

The whole point of salt is to flavor or preserve something else. The whole point of light is to give light to something else. Salt and light are for the benefit of something else. These images are pictures of the church serving the world. The church—all of us, together—are in the world for the benefit of the world. That is why we are walking for water in May, God willing!

Just like salt and light make things better when they are present, the church—God’s people being shaped and united by Jesus—make things better in their community too. The pastor at our former church in Washington once asked their session—if the church wasn’t here, would anyone notice? Would it make any difference to non-members if we weren’t here? That is the question we should be asking too. The church is meant to face outwards. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that the Church is only the Church when it exists for others—not dominating but helping and serving. We are here for the NON-members!

First Pres, in this time of disruption and locked doors, remember that whether we meet in one room or spread out in many homes doesn’t make any difference. We are still called to love God and love our neighbors. We are still united in Jesus by the Holy Spirit’s action, and we are still called to be salt and light—to go make the world better. Dale Bruner, one of my very favorite Bible scholars, says that “Disciples exist for the world, like salt is for food.” We are here, in this place at this time, to make a difference for others. For people who don’t even like us. To be light and salt. We’ve been blessed to be a blessing and we are saved so that we can serve.

Jesus said that we are like a city on hill. People can see it for miles around. We are an example to the world of what it means to be a community of Jesus-shaped people called out to help others. As the church we face out. Sin makes us curl in on ourselves, but love straightens us and sends us out to serve and help; to smile and care; to call and to skype. Church—we can do this— be the Light of Jesus in this dark time. Reach out to your neighbors—see how they are doing. Care for them. As Jesus urges us-- Let your light shine before others so that they may see your good deeds and glorify God! Hear how the Message puts it: “Shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.”

What does it mean to be the church? It means we are called to let our light shine—especially right now.

Let’s pray: Father God—thank you for calling us into your family, for making us part of the Body of your Son Jesus. Please guide and empower us right now to live out our calling as your people by how we love our neighbors. Help us to make a difference in our community, on our street, that will pull people towards you. In Jesus’ name we ask it, Amen.