

**BEING THE CHURCH***by Elaine Poproski*

What is the church?

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “a building for public, and especially Christian, worship” or “a body or organization of religious believers.”

The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines it as “the Christian religious community as a whole, or a body or organization of Christian believers.”

Dictionary.com defines church as “a building for public Christian worship,” “public worship of God or a religious service in such a building,” or “the whole body of Christian believers.”

In the New Testament, *church* is translated from the Greek word, *ekklēsia*, which was a generic Greek term that simply means *an assembly of people*.

I don't know about you, but I don't find any of those definitions terribly helpful. They're all true. When we say we're going to church, we can mean either that we're going to a particular building called a church, or that we're going to a worship service. We all came to church this morning. Even if we weren't meeting in this building, but were meeting, say, in a park, we'd still say we were going to church.

We also talk about the church as people – a religious community that's united by Jesus. Through the worst of COVID, when our buildings were shut down, some people got super offended that the government would dare to shut down churches. But others clarified that because the church is people, they weren't shut down at all – only their traditional meeting places were closed up.

Church is a building; church is a worship service; church is an assembly of people.

Fine. But how does any of that help us understand what it means to actually be the church?

Over the next couple of months, that's the question we're going to be talking about: What does it mean to be the church – to be a gathering or assembly of people? What does it mean to be the church in a way that honours Jesus and honours what it means to be assembled around him? What does it mean to be the church in Toronto in 2022?

When God rescued the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt thousands of years ago, he did so with the intent that they would become a covenant community with him – a community of people who would, because of their unique relationship with him, be a blessing to the other nations of the world. They were a community of people forged by God, defined by God's love and faithfulness. They were meant to be a new kind of community – a community that lived God's priorities in the world.

At some point in Israel's history, likely more than 500 years before Christ, the synagogue became the centre of local Jewish community within which Israel was to live God's priorities in

the world. By the time of Jesus, synagogues were the most important visible expressions of Judaism. They didn't always get it right, but their foundation was strong.

Interestingly (at least to me), the word *synagogue* was of Greek origin, just like the word *ekklēsia*, which I told you a few minutes ago meant *an assembly of people*. Both words – *synagogue* and *ekklēsia* – were used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to local assemblies of Jews meeting for worship, prayer, and teaching. What we think of as a synagogue, could just as easily have been called an *ekklēsia*. But at some point early on, it was Jesus' followers who picked up on the word *ekklēsia* to describe themselves, even as they continued to meet in synagogues. The Apostle Paul preached in synagogues all over the place.

We don't know exactly when Christians and Jews stopped meeting in the same places, but as time went on, it definitely became harder and harder for Christians to meet in synagogues as more and more non-Jews became Christians.

So, what does all this have to do with what it means to be the church?

It means that just like Israel was grouped into local gatherings – into synagogues – that were supposed to be communities living God's priorities in the world, so were Jesus' followers, grouped into local gatherings – into churches – to be communities that lived God's priorities in the world.

And that, in a nutshell, I think, is what it means to be the church: To be a community of people who live God's priorities in the world?

Obviously, there is a lot wrapped up in that simple statement: there's the question of what it means to be a community; there's the question of what God's priorities in the world even are; there's the question of how we're supposed to live those priorities; and there's the question of what it all means – what it all looks like – in Toronto in 2022.

But before getting into all of that, it's really important for us to first recognize that just like Israel's origins trace back to an act of God – the exodus from Egypt – so too was the church birthed, and so it continues, not by human effort, but by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. It's the Holy Spirit that turns us into a family. It's the Holy Spirit that knits us together as a body. It's the Holy Spirit that makes it possible for us to love each other.

If being the church were up to us, I don't think it's possible that the church would have survived for 2,000 years. And yet that being said, I also don't think churches can survive if we don't participate with God in it – if we just sit back and expect him to do everything. Just like Israel's relationship with God was a covenant relationship – a partnership of sorts, so is the church's relationship with God that of a covenant relationship. We are partners with God in God's mission in the world. Obviously, we're not equal partners. But that's part of the miracle of it – part of the amazingness of it. God, rather than just doing what he wants to do, all by himself, has invited us to participate with him in the doing.

That's what today's Scripture reading from Luke is all about.

In Luke 10, we read that Jesus appointed 70 of his followers to go ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. This wasn't the first time Jesus had sent out some of his followers. At the beginning of Luke 9 we read that Jesus sent out just the 12 disciples – the 'special' ones. But here in Luke 10, it's more than just the 'special' ones who are sent. Here in Luke 10, it's 70 others who are sent. They're the regular people – the average men and women. These aren't the ones that get all sorts of extra attention from Jesus. These aren't the ones that saw Jesus standing on a mountaintop with Elijah and Moses, and then heard the voice of God himself declare that Jesus is his son and that they are to listen to him. These are people like us.

Up until now, Jesus was the one doing everything. One of the first things he'd done, shortly after his baptism, was stand up in the synagogue to read Scripture. He read from the beginning of Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord' favour.<sup>i</sup>

They were words of prophecy. They were spoken to Israel centuries earlier as a promise from God. No matter how bad things might get, the day of deliverance would come. God's Messiah would come. Israel would be redeemed.

Jesus read these words, sat down, and told everyone that the words had been fulfilled. Clearly, he meant that he was the fulfillment of these words. He was the promise.

In Mark's gospel, the whole thing is simplified. Mark tells us that the first thing Jesus did was go to Galilee where he proclaimed the good news – the gospel – saying, "the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."<sup>ii</sup>

The words are different, but the message is the same. In Jesus, God's promises are coming true. In Jesus, God's kingdom has come. That was the thesis of Jesus' life. And everything else he did, supported that thesis.

He healed people, he cast out demons, he raised the dead, he loved the unlovable, he told people about God's kingdom – what it's like, he corrected their misconceptions, he challenged people's assumptions, he advocated for the voiceless, he called people to join him. In short, he lived the truth of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

And then he sent his followers out to do the same.

If Jesus had never sent his followers out – if he'd just kept doing everything himself – his life would have been no less extraordinary, but I don't think we'd be gathering today in his name. I don't think there'd be a global movement of Jesus' followers 2,000 years after his death. Because we are intended – have always been intended – to be God's partners in mission in the world. That's what Jesus did. He showed us what it looked like and then he sent his followers to

try it themselves. And then he sent his Spirit to empower his followers to keep doing it even after he'd left them. We are the 70, sent out by Jesus. This is how we live God's priorities in the world – by going where and as we have been sent.

When Jesus sent out the 70, he said this:

“See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide... Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you.’ But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ‘Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.’”<sup>iii</sup>

There's a lot packed into these words of Jesus'. We're going to come back to them over the coming weeks. Today, what I want to focus on are these words: “Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals...”

At its most literal, Jesus is saying, “I want you to be completely dependent on the hospitality of others.” But I wonder if there's not deeper meaning we need to pay attention to. I wonder if perhaps these words are not just literal.

Jesus is sending them out “like lambs in the midst of wolves.” Where they're going isn't safe. What's asked of them isn't easy. At the beginning of September, we read Jesus' words from Luke 14 in which Jesus told all the eager people who wanted to be his disciples, that being his disciple means carrying a cross, it means prioritizing God's mission in the world over everything and everyone else – family, possessions, dignity, even life itself. In other words, “you say you want to follow me, but I'm telling you, being my disciple is not for the faint of heart.” I think he's saying the same thing here. These are his followers – his disciples – and what that means is that they're sent like lambs into the midst of wolves.

And as if that weren't scary enough, they're sent with nothing. No money, no luggage, no shoes, even. And if they aren't allowed to take even those basic necessities, they certainly aren't allowed to take any weapons with which to fight the wolves. They're not being sent out like brave, Davidic shepherd-warriors. They're being sent as lambs – completely vulnerable. And completely dependent.

I have to tell you, if someone I didn't know showed up at my door and told me that Jesus had sent them and could I please let them in, feed them, house them, provide for them, because they hadn't brought anything with them, I'd probably shut the door in their face. I don't generally respond well to that kind of presumption and entitlement. But we're living in a different context than that of the 70 from Luke 10. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century, in the middle east, hospitality was one of the most important societal values. If a stranger showed up at your door, of course you let them in, of course you fed them, of course you gave them a bed to sleep in. That was the way of things.

But even still, even within a culture that values hospitality above almost everything else, Jesus' instructions here seem a bit extreme. Why, then, does he tell them to go with nothing?

I think the point was not complete dependence on the hospitality of other people. I think the point was complete dependence on God.

We live in a part of the world where Christianity has been around for a long time. Churches have been around for a long time, running programs and clubs, bible studies and youth groups, engaging in social projects and offering worship services in every imaginable style and setting. We know how to do church. I googled "how to grow my church" and google came back with 178 million results in ½ a second: 6 Ideas..., 10 Practical tips..., 10 Powerful Strategies..., 25 Strategies..., 14 tips..., 7 ways... and that's not even the end of the first page of results.

There are a lot of people with a lot of answers.

Except increasingly those answers aren't working anymore. Increasingly, churches that are doing everything 'right', still aren't 'succeeding.' What's the problem?

Craig Springer, the author of the book we're going to be reading together over the next couple of months, wrote this in his introductory chapter:

Culture has shifted. We are entering a new epoch. It is possible...that this is the first time in the history of the church where we've had to learn how to navigate a post-Christian culture. Historically, the church has almost always operated in pre-Christian or even Christian contexts. But now, especially in Westernized countries, generations are growing up in a post-Christian environment, where the memory of past spiritual relevance has faded and dulled the impact of faith. Generations are now growing up inoculated against the impact of Christ in communities.<sup>iv</sup>

He goes on to say that there are "four major 'posts' that have brought our culture to the place it is today – creating a new, virtually unexplored world regarding Christian life and evangelism."<sup>v</sup>

We're in a post-Christian culture, a post-family culture, a post-technology culture, and a post-super-size culture. I'm not going to describe these, but I do encourage you to read Springer's descriptions of these 'posts' for yourself. The point for us today, is that things have changed. A LOT of things have changed. The world we live in – the world in which we're trying to be the church – is not the same as it once was. What that means is that all our old tried and true methods, skills, and tools no longer work.

I think the same was true for the 70 disciples Jesus sent. I think he wasn't just telling them not to take, literally, a purse, a bag, or sandals. I think he was saying something bigger. I think he was saying, "Listen, this thing you're part of is new. This thing you're about to do – this whole being sent thing – is new. And if you try to do it with all the tools and experience that used to work, you're going to be disappointed. So instead, don't take anything. Don't rely on all the things you know. Instead, go empty-handed, dependent, vulnerable.

I think these are words we who are Walmer need to hear. I think we need to acknowledge that things around us have changed and we need to accept that the old ways of doing things simply

won't work. One of the gifts of having been stripped down as much as we have as a church is that we can't even pretend that we have everything we need to do church successfully. We know we're completely dependent on God. It's a scary place to be, but it's also incredibly freeing. We don't have to have all the answers. We don't have to have all the expertise, all the things, all the money and people. We just to have to have a willingness to go as we are sent – to be who we are called.

Over the coming weeks, we're going to be considering what it means to be the church – not as it was 20 years ago, but as it is today and as it needs to be tomorrow. We're going to be invited to figure out what it means to be dependent on God instead of ourselves. We're going to be encouraged to try some new things – to be something new. And maybe, as we go through these weeks, we'll catch a glimpse of what it means to be Walmer after today.

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 4:18-19

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 1:14-15

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 10:3-11

<sup>iv</sup> Craig Springer. *How To Revive Evangelism*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 7.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.