

“Being the Church” Rev. Jeffrey Finch — August 15, 2021

Good Morning!

It is a joy to be with you as we begin this “interim time” of ministry together. There are many interesting steps to travel in this journey ahead of us... to understand *what* God is calling us to do...to understand *who* God is calling us to be in this rather unusual point in history.

So today I would like to preach on *being the Church*. What does that mean today?

Throughout our ministry over the last 40 years Laura and I have served in all sorts of different size of congregations.... from large to small.

After graduating seminary, we started as Associate Pastors of a large 1800 member congregation. One day we were at the grocery store and a woman came up to us and began pouring her heart out about a very difficult situation her family was going through.... We *listened*, we *responded* and set up a time to visit with her and her family the next day at our church office. After she left Laura and I looked at each other and said, “*Who was that person?*” The reality is that in a church of 1800 members it is nearly impossible to really “*know*” everyone in the congregation.

Frankly, from that point on Laura and I have been rather intentional about being downwardly mobile. The truth of the matter is that we are *biased* ... we really love ‘*the small church*’...there is a *quality of closeness*...and *intimacy* that can happen in a small congregation that just doesn’t happen very often in a large congregation. *Large congregations can do great ministry....often with very large budgets*...which is *great*, which is *needed*....*BUT* there is something very special...something *sacred* about what happens in a small church.

A fellow by the name of Carl Dudley wrote the following about the small church:

“Belonging to a small church is a feeling. It is based on being among people who know you and among whom you feel at home. Members have lived their faith together. They have celebrated their separate victories and shared their individual losses together in the same place and before the same God. They have learned what to expect from one another, and when to expect it. In effect, if Carol Perkins is late and Sam Riley is loud then all is right with the world, for that’s the way they are. People are who they are, although we may not know how

to explain it. Mr. Jones' question about the budget is as predictable as Sue Polokowski's singing off key.

"God love 'em, that's just the way they are."

The caring church does not treat each person equally. We know one another too well. Each person is accepted, not equally, but individually, by name. Each person has a contribution to make and needs to be met. The caring church will tend to emphasize the uniqueness of each person."

There are lots of *reasons* to be a part of the *church*... I suspect there are so many reasons because there are so many different *needs* as well as so many *understandings* of what the *church is* and what the *church is meant to be*.

The New Testament lesson from 1 Peter we heard a few minutes ago is *overflowing* with descriptions of what we as Christians are called to be as Christ's Church.

- *Living stones*...built into a spiritual house
- *A holy priesthood*...offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God
- *A chosen race*
- *A royal priesthood*
- *A holy nation*
- And finally, *we are called to be God's own people*

Now that's a pretty *demanding* and perhaps *a bit confusing* list of roles to take on. There is enough imagery...enough ideas there to develop at least 3 or 4 sermons...but fear not, I've limited myself to one...it has 27 points.... No, I'm just kidding...I've really limited myself to just a few points, but as I've explored the meaning of all these descriptions there is a common thread that runs through all of them...Simply put, Christianity Is Community.

Someone once said, "*Christianity is a "social faith" for it embodies itself in a unique and organic community of fellow believers.*"

Unique and organic... I rather like that description; there is an *earthiness* to it. To truly live in community requires an *earthiness*; for *true community reflects both the good and the bad of what it means to be a human being*. The beauty and the warts and everything in between. That isn't always easy to accept. Henri Nouwen writes:

“Nothing is sweet or easy about community. Community is a fellowship of people who do not hide their joys and sorrows but make them visible to each other in a gesture of hope. In community we say: Life is full of gains and losses, joys and sorrows, ups and downs—but we do not have to live it alone. We want to drink our cup together and thus celebrate the truth that the wounds of our individual lives, which seem intolerable when lived alone, become sources of healing when we live them as a part of a fellowship of mutual care.”

Christian community is a gift from God...and what God desires most of all is the love of our hearts and the service of our lives.

That sounds rather demanding, doesn't it? Well, I think it is. But that is the fabric which is woven into what we know as the Church today.

I truly believe that the Church today is COUNTER-CULTURE...we are in the minority. In a very real way we are more like the *1st century Church*, like a voice crying in the wilderness...in a way it makes our presence...our *outreach*...our *ministry* more important now than it has been in years because we have something *so unique to contribute to the world.*

Yes, it's challenging, Yes, sometime it is difficult to get our culture's attention, but that makes our contribution all the more significant! We're like a blob of yeast in a big vat of dough, but *by God*, and I do mean *by God*, we can make a remarkable difference because we have something here that the world needs to HEAR...we have something that the world needs to EXPERIENCE.

I do love the small church...rest assured we could stand to grow a bit before we run into the *danger of losing* those wonderful *“small church qualities”* I've been talking about. The *most effective way* to bring that about is by *you* knowing and feeling good about what is happening here and by *you* having the faith and assurance to say out loud, *“Hey, Come and join us, good things are happening here and we'd like you to be a part of it! It will enrich your life.*

I would like to close with one more description of the church by a man named William Boddy. Of all the readings I've done in the last few weeks in preparing for the service today....this reading impacted me the most...it's why I saved it to last...

“Before I was born, my church gave my parents ideals of life and love that made my home a place of strength and beauty. In helpless infancy my church joined my parents in consecrating me to Christ and in baptizing me in his name. My church enriched my childhood with the romance of religion and the lessons of life that have been woven into the texture of my soul...”

In the stress and storm of adolescence my church heard the surge of my soul, she guided my footsteps by lifting my eyes toward the stars. When first my heart knew the strange awakenings of love, my church taught me to chasten and spiritualize my affections. When my heart seamed with sorrow...my church drew me to the Friend of all the weary and whispered to me the hope of another morning, eternal and tearless.

When my steps have slipped and I have known the bitterness of sin. My church has believed in me and...Has called me back to live within the heights of myself...My church calls me to her heart. She asks my service and my loyalty. She has the right to ask it! I will help her to do for others what she has done for me. In this place...I will help her keep aflame and aloft the torch of a living faith in Christ.

May God help us to be the Church that we were meant to be. Amen.