

## **“The Church Is Bigger Than We Think”**

**Acts 2:1–21**

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There is much anxiety today about the future of the Church in our culture. We are all aware of reports about declining numbers, the rise of the “nones” and thus the inevitable dire predictions. All of this was in full force long before COVID-19, but now many have even greater concerns, driven by the fear that a sizable percentage of folks have wandered away during this pandemic and simply aren’t coming back.

There is cause for concern, though we should note that not everyone who is studying these issues believes it is time to prepare a funeral for the Church. Some would be happy to see the Church die, but many retain a life wish for the Church, and among those who recognize alarming trends are people who are trying to help the church by making us all aware of certain realities to which we can respond faithfully.

But while concern is warranted, and our best efforts are required in this time, it is important to remember that the Church with a capital “C” doesn’t depend on us. There is a story about a seminary student bemoaning the state of the church many years ago. His wise professor replied, “If it were up to people, the Church would have died long ago.”

But it isn’t up to people, at least not only people, and that is good news. The Church is God’s idea, God’s work, envisioned in the ministry of Jesus and birthed through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, a great festival we celebrate today with streamers and flowers, sacred texts and inspiring music. We have some understanding of what the Church is, shaped by our experience and reading of scripture, but our understanding is limited. The Church is more than a human organization. The Church is more than our church. It is a sacred reality, the body of Christ, the work of God’s realm. It is bigger than we think in every way we can imagine.

One way the Church exceeds our understanding is in terms of who is included. The reading from Acts 2 makes it clear that the gathering of people

upon whom Spirit is poured is diverse. People from every nation have gathered in Jerusalem. They represent different ethnicities, they speak different languages, they are young and old, male and female. And upon all these people Spirit is poured. In the quote from Joel, not only are all included in God's new community, all see visions and dream dreams — sons and daughters, young and old, slave and free. No one is excluded, all are brought together in one new community.

There is a unity found in this new gathering, a oneness in Christ and Spirit, but this unity does not do away with differences. The people hear in their own languages. Diversity is not drowned out; it is a strength of the early church and any church that bears the name of Jesus. So, as Acts scholar Eric Barreto has argued, we should not imagine a Church that has only one language and voice. We should not seek to erase difference but affirm it. Spirit is found not when all members look, think and act alike, but when we work together across all our differences and take those differences as a starting place for God's work.

This may seem obvious to us, but we are living in a time when diversity has become a challenge, partly because demographic studies indicate that within a couple decades there will be no majority ethnic group in this melting pot of a nation. This makes some people very anxious. Perhaps the Church can help because from the very beginning, the body of Christ is made up of a rich diversity of the human family, people just like us and people very different from us.

The Church includes more people than we think, and not just in terms of ethnicity. Jesus constantly welcomes outsiders and outcasts, the very people other religious leaders exclude, and he says in John 10 that he has sheep not of this fold. We don't know what he means by this other than that the God who was in Christ always seems to include more people than we think — different races and ethnicities, different traditions and denominations, people we cannot imagine being connected to God.

Frederick Buechner puts it this way.

The visible church is all the people who gather together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look.

The invisible church is all the people God uses for his hands and feet in the world. Nobody can find out who they are except God.

Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap. (*Wishful Thinking*, p.15)

God always has more hands and feet than we realize.

But the Church is bigger than we think not only in terms of who is included, but also in terms of its mission or purpose. We like to think our ideas about the Church's mission are linked to Jesus and scripture, and for the most part, they are. But our understanding is limited, and it is shaped by our experience, as it should be, but God is ever more than we can know, and thus God's realm is ever larger than we can imagine.

What happens on Pentecost is an explosion of the Holy Spirit. Jesus has promised the coming of the Spirit multiple times, but even if the disciples believe him, they have no way of knowing what this will mean. The experience is beyond human conception, it is of Divine origin, and what it portends is a mission beyond the simple details Jesus' followers might anticipate. Otherwise, it would be unnecessary for anyone to see visions or dream dreams.

Surely our mission involves certain basic things — giving witness to who Jesus is, making disciples of him, continuing his ministry of healing and compassion, feeding the hungry and clothing all in need. But it also involves things like pursuing justice, delivering the oppressed, working for peace. These aren't just noble human pursuits nor are they simply political involvements that are off-limits for the faithful. They are part of the mission of the Church, the work of God in this world.

We have spent a good bit of time and energy this past year leaning further into this part of our calling, seeking to find some way to respond to racial injustices and political divisions that still haunt us. This is a new endeavor for many churches like ours, but it is part of our mission. And people in certain communities in our country and in other parts of the world have never had the luxury of thinking otherwise.

A recent Rabbis for Human Rights communication includes an article written by the Reverend Dr. John McCulloch, Representative of the Church of Scotland in Israel/Palestine & Minister at St. Andrew Scots Memorial Church in Jerusalem. He spoke this week with Bishop Alexius in the Gaza Strip. In the 2014 Gaza War when the city was under heavy bombardment, the Bishop opened his church doors to 2000 Muslim women and children, knowing that they would be safe in the church compound and not bombed. About the current fighting there, he said, “The situation is terrible but we still have hope.”

“The recent spiral of violence,” McCulloch writes, “not just in Gaza but across Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, has shaken communities, both Israeli and Palestinian to their core. Whilst the casualties are higher in Gaza than in Israel, this is not a numbers game. For the Jewish mother who lost her five-year-old boy to a Hamas rocket, the sheer grief of loss will feel similar to that of a Gazan mother who has lost a child. All of these deaths are human tragedies, and all of them could have been avoided.” Thank God the fighting has stopped...

As a minister working across different communities and divisions, McCulloch says he is reminded that all human beings are made in the image of God, and that the only way a better world is possible is if we love our neighbors as ourselves, and seek their well-being as well as our own. He partners with The Near East Council of Churches which supports a range of initiatives, from providing psycho-social care for children who have known nothing but war and conflict to primary health clinics, vocational training centers and educational facilities. Surely this kind of response to human need is part of the Church’s mission.

The Church is bigger than we think in terms of who is included and in terms of its mission or purpose. And it is just sturdier, more resilient than we realize, like a vessel so much bigger than the Titanic that no social or cultural iceberg can sink it. The Church has endured World Wars and global plagues, periods of persecution and a kind of establishment that is more stifling than persecution, rifts and divisions, every human frailty imaginable. Through all circumstances, the Church, empowered by Spirit, has continued to give witness to Christ, minister to human needs, create space for meaning and

belonging. The Church, with all its flaws, is bigger, sturdier and more noble than we think.

Now, some individual churches may not survive. Some serve a purpose for a time and then are replaced by others that serve a newer purpose and that is okay. And some need to die. Homiletics professor Fred Craddock told a story about a church he pastored as a young man which refused to welcome new people in town living in a trailer park because “they weren’t the right kind of people.” When Professor Craddock went back decades later, he found the parking lot full and every pew packed. It had become a barbeque restaurant; the church had died years before. Craddock said he thanked God the church had died because if it had still been there, most of the people present would not have been welcome. Some churches need to die.

Others need to live, and can live, as long as they include the people God includes and pursue a mission large enough to be part of God’s. That’s where we want to be and are. And that’s where we need to invest our energy — not on the kind of existential anxiety that is so common and understandable right now, but on the nature of the Church with a capital “C” and its calling. We want our church not just to survive but to thrive, and the way we assure that it does is to begin not with our own institutional needs — though they cannot be ignored — but with the work of God in this world. If we are part of that work, we will be okay.

In 1952, J.B. Phillips wrote a book titled *Your God Is Too Small*. In order to respond to a changing world, he argued, we need to expand our understanding of God. We cannot expect to escape a sense of futility and frustration until we understand what God is like and what God’s purposes are.

At times I think our Church is too small, or at least our understanding of Church. The Church is much bigger than we think, and until we understand just how big, we will never escape our anxiety about it. God has poured Spirit upon all flesh. We will see visions and dream dreams and everyone who calls on God’s name will be saved. That’s a pretty big claim, and it includes us, thanks be to God!