

Being Church *I Corinthians 3:10-263*

The old comic strip, *Doonesbury*, was primarily known for its political satire, but from time to time it took a swing at the institutional church, too. In one strip Pastor Scot of the Little Church of Walden is running through the week's activities with the congregation. There's a lecture on nutrition on Monday from Kate Moss' personal chef, a couple of 12-step groups on Tuesday and Thursday, organic gardening on Friday and aerobic male bonding on Saturday. A hand goes up – is there going to be a church service? “Cancelled,” he says. “There was a conflict with the self-esteem workshop.”

I guess that's what makes satire, satire – it's funny, but painfully funny because it's so spot-on accurate. Sometimes the church gets busy doing so many things that it forgets to be the church. It loses its way, its sense of purpose.

I don't know whether or not organic gardening and aerobic male bonding were big in Corinth, but there are other things that can lead a church off course, obviously, and as we've been hearing the past few weeks, what was derailing the church in Corinth were quarrelsome factions. Like in politics, the people there were caucusing around different church leaders and their agendas, spending as much time castigating the others' as promoting their own. Maybe different parties are a necessity in a political system, but in a church all it serves to accomplish is to divide and distract.

The distractions of both Walden and Corinth still exist today, of course. We have the factions – famous-preacher groupies, denominational finger-pointing, conservative and evangelical name-calling, and what not – and we have churches that look more like community centers than houses of worship. But there is a new distraction today that's taking up quite a bit of our time and energy: A conversation around what it means to be the Church?

Now, this one conversation can take several forms. One of them is the “what is going to save the Church?” conversation. Church is looking and sounding very different today than it did 30 or 40 years ago, and that is leaving people asking if all of these new forms of church are legitimate forms of church. In our efforts to get and keep people engaged, and perhaps, entertained, are we losing some essential elements of church-ness? Is the Church supposed to reflect contemporary culture and be constantly changing to adapt, or stand apart from it and call people to be distinctive? That's one of the most obvious conversations. But there are other versions of it that are bit more timeless: where should our money go? What kinds of things should our church be involved in? What is my favorite part? – What am I most invested in? What is important to me?

The problem is, we don't all agree. That's not news to anyone. People feel differently – and strongly – about everything, from when's the proper time of day for a church to meet, to what constitutes sacred music, and how much of the church's budget should be devoted to missions. Even a change in font in the bulletin becomes fodder for heated conversation around the church water cooler. Eavesdrop on any conversation about a church, and chances are pretty good that what you will hear is someone fussing about some aspect of it that's not to their liking, not gushing about some amazing and wonderful thing that is happening there.

Paul's unhappiness with his old friends in Corinth is pretty obvious. But in berating them he goes much deeper than the usual, *alright now, let's all get along with each other* lecture. What he tells them is that something happens to us the minute we walk through those doors. We change. When Paul says, "don't you know that you are God's temple; that God's spirit dwells in you?" he means us, collectively. Not you, John, or Ellen or Jim, or you, Larry. That's a 2nd person plural pronoun he's using there. He's not saying your two arms and legs and spleen and liver are God's temple, so watch what you eat and how you treat it. He's saying, when you all gather, whether it's in a house or a traditional church building, or in a school auditorium, you become the Church. You become something different. You go from being me, to we. You go from thinking like individuals, to thinking corporately.

You can see how that might present itself as a two-headed coin. There's the scolding side, the side that Paul intended for them to hear. When we are together the focus is on our corporate life. When I walk through those doors it isn't just about me anymore. He's saying that this isn't the time or place to stand our ground on our individual wants and preferences and dissatisfactions. Being prophetic about serious problems we need to address, that's one thing – that's what Paul's doing, right? But just being opinionated, that does nothing to proclaim the grace of God to the people outside the church, does it? We aren't being salt and light in the world.

There's one other aspect to our sense of individualism that Paul would find foreign and inconsistent with being God's temple, and that is our way of thinking about 'church' as a place to get our needs met, or our batteries charged. He wouldn't understand that kind of personal, individualistic thinking, expecting to get something out of church, whether it's worship Sunday morning, or some other part of our communal life, and then being dissatisfied if we didn't. He wouldn't understand the casual way we opt out of coming together because something wasn't our style, wasn't our thing. We aren't much of a temple when we approach church like it's a salad bar, picking and choosing among the things we like, and crafting our own individualized spiritual life. When we are here, we are here together, no matter what, and then we are God's temple.

But there's another side of that coin as well, a more positive way of looking at it. Those oohs and ahhs, those inspirational, poignant, electrifying moments that we live for here? Those aren't orchestrated. They don't happen when, by sheer dumb luck, we manage to pick hymns everyone likes one morning, or because the liturgy was especially dramatic. Those mountain-top moments aren't engineered by exceptional worship planners. They happen when we are being a true community. It's our being together, it is communion, koinonia, when we are thinking and acting as one heart and body, not as a roomful of individuals, that the presence of God is almost tangible. Those are the times that you leave here with the feeling, not just that worship was really good today, but that we met Jesus here this morning.

I think it is Fred Craddock who tells the story about a preacher who wanted his congregation to come in to the sanctuary and be quiet and reverent before the service started, and was disturbed one Sunday by a lengthy conversation going on between two gentlemen during the organ prelude. He decided he needed to address the problem with one of the men later, about how he should be spending that time praying and getting ready to worship God, and he was taken aback

when the man says that that's exactly what he was doing. The other man, who was a farmer, was telling him about how his milk cow had taken sick and quit producing, and now he had no milk to give his five-year-old child. *I need to know things like that so that I can worship*, he said. *Now I know how to pray for him, and what 'daily bread' he needs from me today. Now I know how to be Christ to him.*

We are God's temple. The awesome, powerful, peaceful, loving presence of God is manifest here. Not in the beautiful or formidable music, or in Lynnea's words, or mine, but in us, when we come together joyfully and expectantly. When we love being together, more than we love getting our way, like we said last week about being gracious. To celebrate an impending birth. To break bread, or even frozen lasagna together. To watch our teenagers play kickball with our littlest ones. To hear about sick cows, and ask about children gone off to college, and the nephew we prayed for a couple of weeks ago. To remember God's mercies, and hear God's word to us, and carry our broken friends to God. How could God not be present in those moments? How can we fail to recognize Jesus in our presence?

All those other things, the yoga classes, the factions, the anxiety about keeping the church alive, or meeting people's expectations – they're just distractions if we give them too much time. They get us off course. They pull us away from our real purpose, or as Paul says, our foundation. Jesus Christ. Our only reason for being. To be a place where people can encounter Christ. That's why we are here, isn't it? To be touched by the loving, forgiving, healing, gracious hand of Christ. That's what we're hungry for. That's what the world out there is hungry for, what we need to give them the opportunity to find here.

We are the body of Christ, God's temple, God's presence, right here in the north side of Johnson City. May we never forget that.