

“Where is the Church?”

I knew as at the age of 14 or 15 that God was calling me to do “something” in the church. By this, I mean something specific, something different, maybe even something special. But honestly in the South in the mid- seventies, I had never seen a woman minister so that idea did not occur to me. As a result, I would spend the next twenty years bargaining with God – sometimes actively seeking his will and sometimes just riding around in the belly of the whale.

During this time, I tried just about every avenue of ministry except the actual “M” word. In fact, I did a dance with God until my mid-thirties that went something like this, “No God, I can’t do the “M” word but I can sing in the choir, organize Vacation Bible School, serve as an Elder, teach Bible Study, be Moderator of the Women of the Church” and on and on and on.” You get the picture, right? Bur of course, ultimately God’s will prevails. The fact that I am standing here today and have the privilege of offering you God’s Holy meal in just a few minutes is why I so often quote that country song that says, “If you want to hear God laugh, just tell him your plans.”

One of those ventures was to direct the children’s choir for 8 years at my home church. During my time hanging out with the 4, 5, and 6 year olds, we learned a song that went like this, “I am the church, YOU are the church, WE are the church together. All who follow Jesus, all around the world, YES we’re the church together.” This song kept playing in my mind as I prepared a sermon for this year's World Communion Sunday. And to me it begs the question, “Where is the church?”

It seems that Solomon is trying to address this issue in his prayer of dedication offered at the completion of the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. When Solomon's father, King David, had the idea of building a Temple, the Lord gave him very explicit instructions. "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you . . . HE shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

As the writer of Kings lets us know, Solomon in his wisdom heeded God's words and the first Temple in Jerusalem was completed in the tenth century B.C. And just as we dedicate our church buildings and columbarium and prayer gardens and the like, Solomon was dedicating the Lord's Temple with a prayer.

The problem in Solomon's day was that there was a belief that the presence of God actually RESIDED in the Temple. And I am sure that we would all like to think that God's actual presence resides in our churches but if that is the case, then what happens to the rest of the world while God is in church with us? Or to ask it another way, WHERE IS THE CHURCH?

If you grew up at John Knox Presbyterian Church in Greenville then the church is a rectangular sanctuary on 35 Shannon Drive with a center aisle and a large pipe organ. You can enjoy the sunlight filtering through the faintly pink squares of stained glass during the second service on Sunday mornings and sense the presence of God. But is that where God resides? Where is the church?

If you go to Monreat College in Black Mountain, North Carolina and worship at the Chapel of the Prodigal, you can see an amazing fresco painted behind the chancel that

depicts one of the most well known stories in the Bible and then walk outside and see the sunset as evidence of God's sovereignty? Is God in the artwork? Where is the church?

If you worship at Pacifica Retirement Community on Skyln Drive where I led worship Wednesday morning, you will be in a tiny room with yellow walls and 30 or so chairs and an electric orange that is about 3 times too loud for the space. There are two large brass angels standing at attention on either side of a Communion Table, waiting for Advent to come, a huge harp in one corner and a variety of hand me down hymnals from different denominations. Is God in this simple but cluttered room? Where is the church?

And of course if you worship at Nazareth Presbyterian in Moore, you will sit in a beautiful historic sanctuary built in 1832 with oak with rich tones and a marble baptismal font and a newly renovated choir loft to accommodate the growing choir. Is God in the mixture of old and new? Where is the church?

Solomon's answer to his people who believe that God lives in His Temple is this: "Even the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less the house that I have built!" Friends, the truth is that God is not in the church but that the church is in God's people, the body of Christ on earth. The song that I taught the children is a reminder that the presence of God, God's church, is not in the altar or the stained glass windows or even in the Temple. God's church is simply in the world when people gather in God's name.

But Solomon actually takes his lesson a step further and reminds us that God's church is found where God hears the cries of his people. Because the church that Solomon built is dedicated to the God of covenant promises. This means that wherever God's promises are made and kept, God's presence can be found and the church can be established.

So where is the church? Well, let's look at some of the covenant promises. God said to Abraham, "You will be my people and I will be your God." God said to Moses, "I have heard your cries and have come down to deliver you." God said to the prophet Jeremiah, "I am the LORD the God of all flesh – is anything too hard for me?" Jesus said to his disciples, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among you." The covenant promises of God make it clear that wherever God's people are, where they need to be established and heard and sustained, that GOD will be there also and there we will find and experience the church.

But the part of Solomon's prayer that makes his words so important on World Communion Sunday is this: "Likewise when a foreigner, who is NOT of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name . . . when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place . . . so that ALL the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you."

In the Hebrew of the Old Testament and in the Greek of the New Testament, the words "foreigner" and "Gentile" are interchangeable. This means that even those people who are considered outside of the covenant are still heard by God when they offer up prayers in His name.

This says very simply that the church is made up of people who are NOT like us. Therefore, they may not THINK like us or DRESS like us or SMELL like us or WORSHIP like us. They may not share the same political visions that we do or understand sexuality in the way that we choose to but STILL they are children who hear the covenant promises of God and gather in Gods' name. And this says to me that the church cannot be contained in a building or a denomination or a country or at a table

because God's grace and love are higher than the highest heaven. So where is the church?

Friends, when people who cancel out one another's votes in every election stand side by side to serve a meal in the Soup Kitchen, THERE is the church! When an Elder visits a hospital room to share prayer with a brother or sister who is suffering, THERE is the church. When the white haired octogenarian in a pin striped suit stands next to the gum chewing teenager in blue jeans, they can stand together and share a common hymnal and sing, "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love" because THERE is the church.

I spent the weekend at a workshop on Conflict Transformation, held for members of all five Presbyteries in our State in Columbia. The room where the meeting was held was FREEZING all weekend so when our nice boxed lunches were delivered yesterday, we decided to eat outside in a courtyard that we had heard were on the grounds of the campus of the church.

I arrived first to find a beautiful brick space surrounded by benches in a square but one bench off by itself, facing outward. On it there was an African American woman who I assume was homeless and probably mentally ill because she was very dirty and talking to herself.

While I tried to figure out the best way to share my lunch with her, my friend Debbie just walked over and offered hers to her. She took the chips and cookie and declined the sandwich. Debbie then went back inside to get her a bottle of water and a bowl of grapes, which she took.

I asked Debbie if she invited her to join us and she said she was very unfriendly and seemed bothered that we had crashed her space but that she did say "Thank you very much" and had a Bible on her lap. And friends, I believe as we sat in clusters of 2 or 3 on the benches and brick pavers and ate our lunches with that woman talking to herself, WE WERE THE CHURCH. Because when the **people** of God gather in the **name** of God to remember the **promises** of God, God is there and the church is established.

And the same goes for the Table. It does not matter if we take cut up pieces of bread from a silver tray as we do in our tradition, or if soldiers gather around a crate in Iraq with friends from all walks of life and dip stale bread into a common cup. What matters is that the presence of God is in the promises that Christ made when he said, "Take, eat, remember me."

A friend of mine who was a retired minister told me a story before he passed away that I think of every year on this particular Sunday. He had taken some young people on a camping weekend and early one morning, they hiked to the top of a mountain to see the sunrise. The beauty of God's creation took their breath away and one teenager wished aloud that they could have Communion. So my friend melted some grape jelly and cut the ends off of some leftover pound cake and they tasted the body and blood in the fellowship with each other and their Creator. And it mattered not one bit that there was no "Holy" table or proper elements.

This means that it does not matter what WE think of others who gather in the church and seek to find God. It doesn't matter if the meal is prepared in a way that is approved by a Session. Because the church is found when we remember that people who

speaking languages that we will never understand and have names that we can never pronounce are still precious in the eyes of the Lord of all.

The wonderful thing about the Lord's Supper is that it is a feast set by our King and the benefits of that meal do not depend on MY feelings about those gathered with me, but on the Lord's promise of his personal presence made known in the bread and cup. And when God's people gather in any land and pray in any tongue and celebrate God's grace with any means that they are comfortable with, **THERE IS THE CHURCH!**

Friends, as we come to the Table to celebrate the presence of God and the love shown to each of us by the broken body and spilled blood of God's only child, let us rejoice that God cannot be contained even in these walls, even at **THIS** table. Let us pray and worship and sing to the God whose church is in the world and whose children everywhere eat in unity and love on this one day of the year. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf, Nazareth Presbyterian, October 1, 2017