

Hebrews 3:1-6

“Holy Partners”

Famed architect Frank Lloyd Wright once said: “When designing a house, you have to ask what the people want to live in, but you must also keep an eye out for what they want to live for.” I wonder if the author of Hebrews had a similar thought when he penned this portion of his letter to the struggling church. At first glance, it seems as if this chapter of Hebrews is going to be more of the same. The “Preacher” as the author is sometimes called, starts out again talking about Jesus’ superiority to humans and angels. Next, he spends a few verses comparing him to Moses. But in a surprising twist, he then turns his words to us – the church!

When you think about it, there are a lot of organizations that do good things in the world. But the church is different from a social club with service projects or even a civic group that is established for a good cause. Not just because we don’t pay membership fees or have to have sponsors on our applications to join.

No, the church is different because, even though other clubs and groups are usually bound together by people with like minds and like values, the church is bound together by our kinship to Jesus Christ. In the previous chapter, the Preacher reminds us that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. This is amazing when we think about how broken and self-centered we can be. But the truth is that we do not CHOOSE the church. Instead, we are chosen FOR the church.

So, while the PTA and the Junior League and the Chamber of Commerce and various groups that we may belong to or support, all make HUGE contributions to our community and ultimately our world, they are not like the church because the church is built upon the rock

established by Jesus. Tom Long writes: “Faithfulness of Jesus brings worth and abiding value to the church and its struggles to live a faithful Christian life.” (1)

In fact, in this passage we are given three very important distinctions to consider that makes the church unique. First, we are ONE. Now this does not mean that we are always in agreement. Anyone who has spent even a small amount of time in the church knows that this is not true because the church is made up of people. But as I wrote this, I remembered something that the women who attended the 2018 Women’s retreat may remember too. It was what we learned about the Pando.

In Utah, there is a phenomenon often called the Trembling Giant. It is a clonal colony of individual aspen that has been determined to be a single living organism because it has one massive underground root system. The plant covers 106 acres and is estimated to weigh collectively 6,600 tons. At approximately 80,000 years old, it is among the oldest known living organism in the world. It is called the Pando, Latin for “I spread out” and while it looks like many trees, because of its root system it is considered to be only one tree.

Just like the Trembling Giant, the pando, spreads from the roots of one plant, so we, as the church of Christ are unified in our kinship with our savior. Christians all over the world are rooted and grounded in the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, no matter what our churches look like or how our services may differ.

The reminder that we are ONE not only unifies us but calls us to concentrate more on that which *makes* us one than on the differences we may find in our brothers and sisters.

Specifically, we are called to remember that we are all saved by the broken body of Christ and washed in his blood, no matter our circumstances. That everyone here is on level playing ground when we stand at the foot of the cross. And in our world that is often divided by politics, gender,

ethnicity, race, sexual preferences and socioeconomic factors, this act of unity is surely a cause for celebration. On a personal level, when someone has wronged you and you are navigating the waters of forgiveness, if you know in your heart that they are a brother or sister in Christ, it helps to remember that God sent his son into the world to save that person too!

The writer of Hebrews also tells us that we are Holy. Now for some of us, this may be a tough pill to swallow. Again, the church and the world are made up of sinful people and most of us are well aware of what our individual sins are. So the church is just a group of sinners gathered together. But because we are gathered by the grace of God, God's own holiness is given to us as a gift. Another way to say this is that we are MADE holy by the presence of Christ.

In theological terms, we call this sanctification. As Reformed Christians, we believe that, once we recognize Jesus as our savior, we BECOME more holy each day. Every one of us is on the journey of being made holy but it is only through the merits and justification of Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that this is possible. Sanctification, like salvation, is not something we accomplish on our own. Teaching Sunday school or singing in the choir or serving at the Soup Kitchen does not sanctify us. It may bring us closer to Jesus and to our brothers and sisters in the world, but only the grace of God makes us more like Jesus each day.

Now honestly, that is the seminary explanation of sanctification and one that many of us, me included, may not be able to relate to. So we might look at it this way. When we are being sanctified, the power of Jesus in us can make something ordinary into something holy. Our lives become sanctified through God's efforts and out of God's love and for God's purposes – not our own. A good illustration is to think of the Communion Table.

Each time we come to the table we are served ordinary bread. It might have been made in some church member's kitchen or it might have been purchased at Ingles! In the same way, our cups may have the expensive Welch's brand of grape juice or the juice may have been bought in bulk at Costco. They are ordinary elements. But when we use them for the Lord's Supper, they are set apart for holy use. The bread and the cup become used for God's purposes – to remind us of the sacrifice of love made for each one here. And they BECOME Holy.

That is why the church, the congregation, is holy. We have been called by God, established for God's purposes, filled with the Holy Spirit to do God's work. To worship God and make disciples for Christ in many and various ways,

Finally, the writer of Hebrews says that, as the church, we are apostolic. Now, at first this one really confused me. In the Roman Catholic church, bishops are chosen because they are supposed to have succeeded from the Apostles of Jesus. However, in the Protestant church, we do not have bishops. So we claim that truth for every one of our members. You see the word 'Apostle' simply means sent. And we all believe that Jesus was sent by God to be our high priest – our direct connection to God. And we acknowledge that he satisfied the sacrificial element that priests in his day received on our behalf, by his death on the cross.

Therefore, since Jesus was sent by God as OUR Apostle, and Jesus dares to call us his brothers and sister, we TOO are apostles for God. We stand in the great line of the traditions passed on from one generation to the next. Indeed, by Jesus' last sermon to his disciples before his ascension, which we call the Great Commission, we have been sent also. To go and make disciples of all nation, baptizing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to teach God's commandments by our words and our actions.

And just like those first disciples, we know we have an advocate in Heaven – Jesus himself. Jesus sits at the right hand of our Heavenly Father and, by the Spirit, prays for us, directs us and gives us everything we need if we are open to receiving it. This means that our work in the church has already been validated in Heaven. We have been given radical freedom from the need to justify our own work on the basis of what the world expects because we are answering a higher calling.

Now it would be easy to think all of this is just “preacher talk”. I mean – it sounds good in the pulpit but is it true when the rubber meets the road. But let me share a personal experience of truly seeing how God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves if we believe that we are one, holy, apostolic church as God’s people.

When I was growing up in the 70’s, we had a big youth choir at my home church – about 40 kids from 9th – 12th grade. Every year, we would perform a Christian musical complete with actors, lights orchestra – the works. I had a friend who went to another high school that had a beautiful voice and was also a devout Christian. She dated a boy from my high school who was a little bit of a “bad boy” if you know what I mean.

Well in this particular year, she wanted to come to the musical because I had a solo, so Chuck came with her. I was surprised when I saw him in the pews because he had been pretty clear that his family was not a church going family. But her REALLY liked her!

The musical, entitled “Celebrate Life”, tells the story of our salvation through Jesus Christ from before his birth to after his resurrection. After it was over, Chuck came up to me with tears in his eyes. And this big, bad football player said, “I never really understood all that Jesus stuff but hearing what you all sang tonight, it all made sense to me.

Now let's look at the elements of this story. Truthfully, most of us were there because we loved our Youth Pastor AND his wife, who was the choir director. We loved being with our friends and learning to perform was great fun. Somewhere in there, I am sure the adults realized that we were also deepening our faith but it was not OUR primary purpose for coming to choir. In those days, it was just what you did – you went to church on Sunday and Wednesday. Period.

Chuck was there because he was trying to score brownie points with his girlfriend. He didn't give a hill of beans about church, singing or anything else. He just wanted her to like him more. Yet God sent wonderful apostles through the pastor and choir director and gave many of us gifts of singing and acting and working behind the scenes. God gave each of us the desire to grow in our faith whether we knew it or not and gave Chuck the desire to want to please his girlfriend. THEN God was able to use all those things to help one individual hear the message of salvation in a way that touched his heart.

That is a lot of working in the one, holy, apostolic church and we didn't even know it! We were just having fun – being teenagers. Yet, because Jesus Christ was in our midst, we were making disciples for Christ. Can you imagine that God cared about one individual to use all those things to work together for his salvation? Well, friends, this is what God does every minute of every day and God uses this church to accomplish his tasks.

Now, I really cannot feel like I have completely explained this passage unless I address all that talk about Moses. In the Old Testament, Moses was the individual most comparable to a savior. He was used by God to rescue the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and delivered them to the Promised Land. So the Jews who were looking for a Messiah were looking for a new Moses.

The writer of Hebrews wanted the 2nd Century Christians to understand that, while Moses was an integral part of the house that they lived in, Jesus was the builder. The intent was not to

cast a shadow on Moses by to shine the light on Jesus, who was already rooting for God's people in Heaven as they traveled through the wilderness.

As I wrote that, I thought about the column in our own sanctuary. For those of you who don't know it, this sanctuary was at one time, turned sideways. The pulpit used to be over there, near where the Mike Baier is sitting. And those doors were where people entered and exited. And other changes have been made since 1835 when this structure was built and will continue to be made as we grow and change.

But not the column. At least not yet! Because the column is not ornamental. It is structural. It actually holds the building up. So Moses might have been part of the building, just as you and I are. But Jesus is the column. Moses was a part of the blueprint and Jesus is the architect. So this church and every church that serves God for God's purposes is built by God, for Christ. Moses served as God's servant in the house where Jesus lives and so do we.

When I was fifteen, the current sanctuary was built for the church that grew up in. Went from tiny chapel, that held about 150 people to a grand sanctuary that holds over 500. But early in our worship there, the minister asked the youth to help with a sermon. It started with me singing one line from right where I was sitting in the pews. "I am the church. You are the church." Then another friend stood up and joined me, "We are the church together."

The song continued until the whole youth group had stood up and joined in. "All who follow Jesus, all around the world. Yes, we're the church together. The church is not a building, the church is not a steeple the church is not a resting place, the church is a people."

Friends, we are the church. By the grace of God we are one, holy apostolic gathering of disciples, called to grow and live and share in God's love. To show those whom we meet that we trust even when we cannot see because we are Holy partners with the Trine God. Let us do

so as the early church did – with confidence and pride. In the name of the Father and of the Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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