

“Celebrating the Church”
Exodus 19:3-6; I Peter 2:9-10;20-24; Proverbs 3:5-6; John 15:9-12
Salem United Methodist Church; October 25, 2015
Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

For the past few weeks we have been talking about the stewardship of money. We borrowed our ideas from the wisdom of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, who wrote in his sermon, “The Use of Money,” “Earn all you can... Save all you can... Give all you can.” Today as we celebrate the gifts that we bring to the church, we will look at what the church is and what the church means to us and to God.

This sermon is going to be more of a dialogue sermon than a preaching one. So be prepared to share. We are going to jump right in with a question. Your neighbor or a co-worker found out that you go to church. They don’t have any faith community. Out of curiosity they ask you, “What is a church?” “Why do you go to church?” What would you tell them?

We often refer to the church as a building. For instance, we have a picture of the church on our website. We are proud of this historic building. Many who enter for the first time comment on its beauty. The church, however, is not this building. If this building were to be destroyed somehow, we would be sad (and hope we have enough insurance on it!), but Salem would still exist. Why? Because Salem is us-the people. The church is the people. The writers of the New Testament knew this. Writing in Greek they used the term, *ekklesia*, for the church. *Ekklesia* means “people gathered.” Whoever gathers in the name of Jesus is the church. We are the church. The church is the people. Yet we will say, “I go to church.” When we are saying this we are really saying, “I am going to the church building.” We go to the theatre or a football game, but church is who we are not somewhere we go. Because we are the church.

One church had T-shirts that its members wore. On the front was written, “I don’t go to church.” On the back was written, “I AM the church.” And then it had the church’s name and address posted. We are to be the church, not go to the church.

God’s original plan for the people of faith was to be. Look at the scriptures from Exodus and 1 Peter. Look at the Exodus passage first. God had something special in mind for the Israelites. The words Moses was to tell the people for God were these. “If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall *be* my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall *be* for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. The word, *be* is in this passage twice. God had chosen this group of people to represent God in the world. In order to do this, they were to be obedient to God by keeping the covenant which included the laws that God gave them to live by. These laws focused on living a holy life by loving and respecting God and by loving, respecting, and caring for each other. They were to do this as a group. This was not an individualized faith, this was a group effort. They were to be priests, a holy people, to the world. Did it work? No, God calls them back repeatedly through the prophets to be just this. Later after Jesus has come to be with us, Peter as one of the leaders of this developing faith, which later is called Christianity, borrows from this Exodus passage but rephrases it to the gathered people. Peter tells these people that they are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. They are to share what Jesus has done for them and then he proceeds to remind them what Jesus has done. Peter doesn’t use the word, *be*, as was used in Exodus, but instead uses the word, *are*, the present tense form of the infinitive, *to be*. You are. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are chosen by God *to be* priests or ministers. And in doing so *we are* to be

holy. I am holy. You are holy. We are holy together. I am a priest. You are a priest. We are priests together. The church is not a building or a set of policies, although we do need rules and order, but the church is the people who love and follow Jesus. So then what does it mean “to be” the church? What does it mean to say “I AM the church?”

To be the church is to be behind its mission as we live out our ministries. The mission of the People of Salem United Methodist Church is to grow in Christian faith and express God’s love to all. The leaders who composed this specifically placed the word, “people” in this because they knew that the church is its people. But I don’t think any of us realized at the time when we chose the wording for the last part, “to grow in Christian faith and express God’s love to all, just how closely this relates to the passages from Exodus and 1 Peter. The “growing in Christian faith” is the becoming holy part and “the expressing God’s love to all” is “being the priests” part. Church is not something we do on Sunday mornings. It is something that we are 24/7. No matter where we are or what we are doing, we are the church. No matter what our other responsibilities are, our first responsibility is to spend time developing our relationship with God and sharing God’s love to whomever we meet.

How are we at Salem being the church? We offer devotional groups, prayer groups, Bible study, and other faith development classes. This is to help us work on the “holy” part. Then the “priestly” side is that we offer many different ministries to the community. We open our facilities to different community groups. We have been serving a meal once a month for more than thirty years to a local community club that serves our community. We serve some of the poorest in our community at the Lord’s Table, a local soup kitchen. We serve by giving food to Olney Help, our local food pantry. We serve by collecting school supplies and holiday food baskets. We serve some of the poorest in our nation when we go to Appalachia to make their homes safer, warmer, and drier. We connect with our community when we are present at the Olney Community Night. We connect with our community by having Halloween parties, Trunk or Treats, and Christmas Bazaars. We connect with our community with the signs we post on our property. These are all part of our “priestly” duties. To be the church we are to serve as priests to our community. These are ways that Salem has strived to serve.

Yet, there are times when we fall short of our priestly duties. There have been times when we have had very few people show up to serve. Because of the lack of participation, we may need to decide if we should continue these valuable ministries to our community. The question for me becomes “Why are people not showing up to serve?” Do they think they will not be missed? Are they too involved with other activities of their own lives that they neglect to realize that the ministry of Salem is a very important activity of their lives? Or are we not effectively communicating to the congregation about what these ministries are all about and how one can serve? Or do we think someone else will do it? I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together.

When we become members of Salem United Methodist Church we promise to support the church with our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. *To be* the church we need prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness of everyone.

I offer to us this Proverb in closing. It is one that has guided me in my life as a holy priest both as a lay person and now as clergy. I think it is an appropriate one as we consider how we are the church. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge the Lord, and God will make straight your paths.”

