



North Shore
**Congregational
Church**
FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“What the World Needs Now”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Romans 12: 1-8

October 28, 2018

It's been a fascinating journey, this last month and a half, to meet in Bible study, explore the passages of the week, and then bring that communal exploration into the service on Sunday morning. I have found myself genuinely compelled and moved, at times, by some of the thoughtful and considered input that was being shared, and I have found myself energized by the questions and possibilities that were being explored for the 21st Century Church. But, in the midst of all of it, one of the things that has stood out to me has been an underlying theme that was present from one passage to the next – a theme that just kept echoing more and more clearly every week.

Consider the walk we've shared together through these images of the Church in the New Testament.

- We started with images of the Church as a letter from Christ, as ambassadors of Christ, and in the midst of a world constantly seeing the reports of scandals in the Church, we asked ourselves what message about God, about Jesus, is being sent in who we are and what we do.
- The following week Julie dug in to the lesson of the fig tree, and we questioned what it means to bear fruit in this world.
- The story of Jesus naming Peter as the Rock on which the Church will be built, and Paul's images of building on the foundation that is Christ, reminded us of the essential core of our faithfulness being our clinging to Jesus as the heart and mind of all we do.
- The parable of the sheep and the goats – the allusion to sorting people based on those who have served the needy and downtrodden and those who have ignored such needs – that parable brought forth the question of if/when/how Jesus is living in and through us.
- Then, last week, we came to stories of the bridegroom and we were reminded of our need to keep our lamps lit and to be dressed and ready for action – we honed in on the call of the church to be tuned in to God, prepared to respond to God's call, and willing to go where (and when!) God leads.

It's been a truly intriguing journey at times, but there is a theme that came ringing through it all. Consider all of those explorations we've shared. Sending messages...bearing

fruit...building...serving...bringing Christ to others...being ready for action...I could go on and on with the ways it plays out in all of these passages, but if there is any theme that I see ringing through these themes that we've taken on in the past month and a half it is that you cannot be the Church in a passive state. To be the Church is the BE the Church...to ACT as the Church...to LIVE OUT as the Church...we simply cannot be the Church that God is calling us to be in a passive state. Being the Church, at least in the way the New Testament described it, is an activity, not a state of being.

As we come to this final image of our series, that of the body of Christ, there were about a thousand ways we could have gone with it. It is a question of unity amidst diversity, it is a reflection of spiritual gifts, it raises considerations of service, devotion, faithfulness, the list goes on and on. But, for me, the overwhelming subtext of considering the Church as the body of Christ is to acknowledge that the Church is the ongoing presence of Christ to the world. In a world that was once blessed by the loving, gracious, healing, life-altering ministry of Jesus, the Church is now the one with the responsibility to carry out that same ministry as the ongoing presence of Jesus in this world. And that, my friends, is not something that's going happen by sitting in the pews and waiting for God to do the rest. To be the Church is the BE the Church...to ACT as the Church...to LIVE OUT as the Church...we simply cannot be the Church that God is calling us to be in a passive state. Being the Church, at least in the way the New Testament described it, is an activity, not a state of being.

The latter verse of our passage from Romans starts listing some of the many gifts that God gives to us for ministry in the world... "ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation." It's an intriguing list, but there is a subtle difference in the way the NIV translation reads that I think speaks to exactly what I am trying to bring out here. "We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us." Paul says, "If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully." Do you hear the difference there? If your gift is to teach – then go teach! If your gift is to give to those in need – then go find those in need and serve! If your gift is to encourage those who are down – then find those who are down and encourage them! Whatever your gift is, it is not a gift meant to make you feel good that there's something your good at, it's meant to be used, to be active, to be engaged, to be lived out in service to others. In other words...we cannot be the Church God is calling us to be in a passive state.

The more I came towards this message this morning, the more that old song kept ringing in my brain, "What the world needs now..." I think the Church, not just our church, but the Church, is painfully misguided, at times, in the manner in which it would finish that phrase.

- 'What the world needs now,' the Church might say, 'is to understand Jesus.'
- 'What the world needs now, is to hear about Jesus.'
- 'What the world needs now, is to pray to Jesus.'
- 'What the world needs now, is a place to worship Jesus.'

I could keep going, but the problem is that what the world needs now is Jesus! Not preaching about Jesus. Not belief in Jesus. Not subscribing to theological tenets regarding Jesus. Not

billboards proclaiming some eschatological doomsday of Jesus. The world needs Jesus. The world needs the love-driven, grace-filled, mercy-inspired, spirit-lifting, healing, life-altering ministry of Jesus. And, if we are going to subscribe to Paul's image of the Church as the body of Christ, that means we are the ongoing presence of Christ in the world. And, if the Church, if we, are the ongoing presence of Christ in this world, then the only way the world gets the ministry of Jesus they need is through us.

To be the Church is the BE the Church...to ACT as the Church...to LIVE OUT as the Church...we simply cannot be the Church that God is calling us to be in a passive state. Being the Church, at least in the way the New Testament described it, is an activity, not a state of being. If the world needs Jesus, and we are the ongoing presence Christ in this world, then the living out of that ministry is on us!

It's been a rich and meaningful series, and I have deeply appreciated all of those who have taken the time and the heart to participate. And, I don't where all of this journeying and exploration will take us in the end. I don't know where God is longing for us to go...what future God is longing to unfold in this body of Christ. What I do know, however, is that the world needs Jesus, and we are that ongoing presence in the world. So, wherever it is God is longing to lead us, we're never going to get there if we are sitting in this room and waiting for God to do the rest.