



DOES CHURCH MATTER?

SERIES: DOES IT MATTER?

1 Corinthians 12:12-27

Seventh Message

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For our summer series we have been asking the same question of eight different topics: Does It Matter? Today we come to our seventh topic: Does Church Matter? But before we consider this question I want to mark two important anniversaries.

For the past few days the world has been celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Apollo 11 mission that first landed men on the moon. The past two nights, the launch of the Saturn V rocket has been projected onto the Washington Monument in DC, the perfect screen for it. Google marked the occasion with an elaborate video doodle, an animation of the entire Apollo 11 mission, narrated by Michael Collins.

This anniversary of the lunar landing coincides with the second anniversary: it was fifty years ago that I watched TV for the first time. I'm sure I'm not alone in that being my first TV experience.

On July 20, 1969—50 years ago yesterday—the Apollo 11 Lunar Module landed on the moon and the famous words were heard, “The Eagle has landed.” Grainy images were transmitted back to earth from a video camera mounted on one leg of the module. Neil Armstrong slowly descended the ladder, stepped onto the lunar surface, and said, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

All over the world great crowds of people gathered around TV sets to watch these grainy images. I was one of them. I was nine years old, living in rural Thailand where my parents were missionaries. We didn’t have a TV and didn’t know anyone with a TV. At the time we were on holiday at the beach. My father took me in to the nearby town and we stood outside a shop, watching a TV through the window. It’s estimated that 600 million people watched the event on TV. On that day technology drew the world together.

A few years later the Apollo program ended. The scientists and engineers dispersed. Many came here to the Bay Area and continued to develop new technologies at an ever-accelerating pace. Now a watch has far more computing power than any Apollo spacecraft. Now we expect video in HD, even in 4K. Now we expect Video on Demand, rather than be constrained by broadcast schedules.

There are still a few events that gather crowds around a TV all over the world, notably a royal wedding. On our Footsteps of Paul tour through Greece last year a lunch stop was prolonged so people could watch Meghan Markle process down the aisle to meet Prince Harry.

But times have changed. Now we have new iconic images, such as Apple’s ads featuring a silhouetted figure with white-corded earbuds. Now technology isolates people rather than drawing them together. Now in a crowd people are watching their own small screen, streaming video from anywhere in the world, viewing in isolation, sealed off from one another by their personal earphones. People are simultaneously more and less connected than ever: more connected to more media and to more “friends,” but desperately lonely and disconnected.

Technology has spread to the church. Video cameras are now common in church sanctuaries and auditoriums—except here: PBCC is way behind the curve. Video cameras were first used to enhance community; to record services for the benefit of members who were shut in at home or in a nursing home. Some churches still use local public-access cable channels for this. But that’s not how most cameras are used today. Sermons are beamed in real time to satellite campuses that might even be in another state, or webcast on the internet. The person watching need have no personal connection with the preacher or the worship team, be no part of the community. Last year Sue and I attended a church in Maui, where the sermon was streamed in from southern California.

Once you get used to watching a sermon on a big screen at a set time, why not switch to watching at home at a time of your own choosing? Why bother coming to church at all? Why not stay home and put together your own service: say, a worship set from Bethel or HillSong, followed by a sermon by a big-name preacher somewhere else? Why not go to the beach then listen to a podcast sermon later in the week? Or, if you still want to feel “holy” on Sunday morning, why not tune in from the beach?

Does church matter any more? A few decades ago no one would have asked this question, Does church matter? Church was part of the fabric of American life. There were churches in every neighborhood. When new neighborhoods were developed it was assumed churches would be part of the residential mix. PBCC is a legacy of that age; we’re here in a neighborhood, surrounded by residences.

Sundays used to be relatively free of secular activities. It was assumed that many people would go to church. But times have changed. More and more sporting activities are scheduled for Sunday mornings. It is now assumed that most people do not attend church. This is especially true in the Bay Area, indeed, most of the west coast. So does church still matter? Does the church have any place in society, or is it irrelevant?

You are here this morning. Your presence implies that for you church does matter. You haven’t stayed home to do church online. You haven’t gone to the beach, to catch the podcast sermon later.

But why does church matter? Why do we “do church”? Why all over the world have Christians gathered today, Sunday?

1. What is the Church?

Before we can address “Does church matter,” we have to ask what “church” is. What do we mean by “church”? Our English word “church,” like German *kirche*, derives from the Greek word *kuriakos*, meaning “pertaining to or belonging to the Lord, *kurios*.” So the church is the Lord’s people, the people belonging to God in Christ through his Spirit. Romance languages use a different word: Spanish *iglesia*, or French *église*, derived via Latin from a different Greek word, *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly or a gathering. Both ideas are

important. We belong to the Lord, not just individually, but collectively as a people gathered together, as a congregation that is assembled. Church is the Lord's people gathered as a people. At its most expansive, the Church is all the Lord's people, all those who identify with and follow the Lord Jesus Christ, "all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:2). This is a great company of people through space and time who all share a common identity as the Lord's people.

At its most expansive, this common identity is expressed in the Nicene Creed which we recited earlier. "We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." The church is one, despite all its divisions, because it confesses one God, Father Almighty, and one Lord, Jesus Christ. The church is holy, set aside by God through his Spirit to be his people in Christ. The church is catholic, that is it is universal; it is not identified with any one people group or nation or race. The church is apostolic, built upon the foundation of the apostles whom Jesus commissioned to go out and proclaim the good news of what God had done in Christ.

Under this confession of the Nicene Creed are united the five major churches: the Eastern Orthodox Church with fifteen branches; the Oriental Orthodox Church, which includes the Coptic Christians of Egypt; the Church of the East, which includes the Assyrian Church of Iraq and the Mar Thoma Church of South India; the Catholic Church, both Roman and Eastern; and the Protestant Church. Under the most generous orthodoxy, these all are our brothers and sisters. All of these churches are represented here in the South Bay; they are our neighbors. The word "church" is used for each of these five major branches of the universal church, and for their totality as the single universal Church.

At the other end of the spectrum, "church" is used for an individual congregation: Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino (PBCC)—that's us. As an individual church we are part of a larger whole. We are part of the Protestant Church, which is part of the universal church that shares a common faith expressed in the Nicene Creed.

Various elements of our service have reminded us that we are part of something much bigger than just me, much bigger than just us, PBCC, our church. We started with the *Te Deum*, an ancient Latin hymn from the fourth century. *Te Deum laudamus*, "You, O God, we praise." Who praises God? An ever-widening circle: angels, the glorious company of apostles, the noble fellowship of prophets, the white-robed army of martyrs—note those collective words "company," "fellowship." All these are praising God in his very presence, for they have gone before us. Finally the circle reaches earth: "Throughout the world the holy Church acclaims you: Father, Son, Holy Spirit."

We recited the creed together, reminded that for 1600 years the entire Church around the world has been reciting this as its common confession, its common faith.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven...and was made man.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life...

The Church is the people who confess faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Individual churches may disagree about much else, they may have detailed doctrinal statements that differentiate them

from other churches. But all are united on the Creed. All share the same basic understanding of God.

The Church is a people, the Lord's people, the people who confess the Lord Jesus Christ and seek to follow him. It is important to remind ourselves that we are a people, and part of a much larger people, the Lord's people. Since the Enlightenment, the Western world has been individualistic in its thinking, self-centered in its focus. This is especially true here, for American culture is rooted in individualism. The idea of Church reminds us that we are not our own, we are the Lord's. We belong to him not to ourselves. It reminds us that we are not alone, we are a people. And it reminds us that we are not the center of attention, the triune God is.

We have gathered in this building, also called a church, as PBCC, a local church, to "do church." Does it still matter to "do church," that is, to regularly gather together for a church service? Or can we just do church online? Does listening to a podcast of the sermon count as "doing church"?

What does it mean for PBCC to be a church? Why do we gather on a Sunday morning in a church building to "do" church?

2. Communities of Memory

Churches are communities of memory and hope. We gather to pay attention to past, present and future. As a community of memory we gather to remember two major things: *whose* we are and *who* we are. We gather to remind ourselves of who God is, this God whose we are, and we remind ourselves of who we are in light of who God is.

2.1. God

"We gather in worship to remind ourselves who God is, what he has done in Christ, and what he is doing through his Spirit." These words are printed in the worship guide each week. During the week many things have competed for our attention; we've been pulled in many different directions. We have become fragmented, disoriented. On Sunday we gather to remember, to re-focus, to re-center. We gather to pay attention to God. We pay attention to who he is: he is the one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth. He is the one in whom all things begin. He is our Maker, not we ourselves. He is God and we are not. Seeing afresh who he is, we praise and worship him because it is appropriate to do so. By paying attention to God and worshiping him we render secondary all the things that have competed for our attention and for our worship during the week.

We pay attention to what God has done in Christ, the one Lord Jesus Christ, who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven and was made human. He was crucified for us, he rose again according to the Scriptures, and now he sits at the Father's right hand as the true King. This is the apostolic teaching, contained in the Scriptures, the tradition handed on from generation to generation. At the heart of this tradition is Jesus Christ, and what God has done in Christ. This is the narrative that constitutes us, that makes us who we are. Our story is anchored and rooted in the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

We praise and worship the risen, ascended and enthroned Lord Jesus Christ. It is fitting to do so for he is our Savior and our Lord. By worshiping the Lord Jesus Christ, we render secondary all other things that claim to save us, that claim lordship over us. We render secondary all other stories of identity, all other narratives that try to define us.

And we pay attention to what God is doing through his Spirit, the Lord and giver of life. By invoking God's Spirit we render secondary all other things that claim to be life-giving. It is God through his Spirit who gives us life, notably the life of Christ. The Son was made like us that we might be made like him. This is what God is doing through his Spirit, transforming us so that we might be like Jesus.

We all have our own individual and group narratives. We bring our pains, disappointments, hopes and dreams this morning. But we share one narrative that supersedes them all, that binds us together. We need to remind ourselves regularly of this narrative, of this story into which we are adopted.

We remind ourselves of these things in the songs we sing, in the prayers we offer, in the Scriptures we read, in the sermon we hear. The point of singing is not to have an individual worship experience, but to refocus us on God, to express certain truths about God, to remember who he is, and thus remember who we are. We do this collectively for we are a people.

2.2. Us

Having re-focused our attention on God and refreshed our memory, we then remind ourselves of who *we* are in relation to God, in relation to one another, and in relation to the world. We affirm our identity and allegiance in the present.

2.2.1. In relation to God

In relation to God, we are his people. Each one of us belongs to the Lord, but it is so important that we express this corporately. "We...people." We are gathered here with various identities: ethnicity, nationality, gender, marital status, life stage. These are all important elements that define who we are. But there is one other identity that should render all these secondary. We are the people of God in Christ. We are the Lord's people first and foremost. We gather together to express that.

We are "in Christ." Through God's Spirit we have been adopted as his children, his sons and daughters. The Son became like us so that we might become like him. This means that God the Father looks on us the same way he looks on his Son. His Son is his beloved Son. So we are his beloved sons and daughters on whom he looks with kindness, with fondness, with love. He has removed our guilt and our shame: the guilt that comes from doing wrong, the shame that comes from being wrong. He has forgiven our sin. He has reconciled us to himself so he looks on us with favor.

Our identity is "in Christ"; therefore we give him our allegiance. Many other things compete for our allegiance, but regularly we gather to reaffirm our allegiance not to a flag, not to a nation, not to a people, but to Christ.

Does church matter to God? Yes. The church is the people of God; we are his beloved, even as his Son is his beloved.

2.2.2. In relation to one another

We remind ourselves who we are in relationship to one another. We are not all alike. The danger with a large church is that we self-select into groups of like people. The advantage of a small church is that we are all thrown together as a disparate group. We're a mid-dling-size church, which means we still have to consciously avoid self-selecting into like groups.

Last year I spent some time with the pastors of Oakland City Church. The catch-phrase of this church is "a church of people who 'don't belong together,' gathering around Jesus, for the sake of those

who don't belong." I love that. It's been on my mind ever since. We don't belong together; this is especially true in this age of identity politics, of nationalism, of tribalism, of partisanship. But we are gathered together around Jesus as those who confess him as Lord, and who seek to follow him. We engage in the work of learning how to belong together in Christ. We engage in the work of practicing the one-another commands of Scripture; the hard work of learning how to be patient, kind, forgiving, forbearing with one another. We do not do this just through our own effort. God, through his Spirit, enables us to do so, for "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22-23).

We can't do these things on our own. We need to love someone, even someone whom we find it hard to love. We need to show patience with someone else, even someone who pushes our buttons. We need to learn to live together. Because we have reminded ourselves that we are a beloved, forgiven people to whom the Lord has shown patience, kindness, goodness and faithfulness, we seek to imitate him in showing the same to one another.

As the church we are simultaneously many but one. The NT uses several different metaphors for this paradox. We are one family: brothers and sisters, with Christ Jesus as our elder brother and God as our loving Father; we are many but one. We are a temple: each of us building blocks, on the foundation of the apostles with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone, being built into one dwelling place for God; we are many but one. We are collectively one bride: chosen by the Father, being prepared by the Spirit, for presentation to Christ our bridegroom; we are many but one. We are one body: each an individual part, with Christ Jesus as the Head; we are many but one.

It can be hard to be an individual part within a body. Paul describes two particular challenges in 1 Corinthians 12. One challenge is to feel that you don't belong:

If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body"... And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body"... (1 Cor 12:15-16 ESV)

An individual may feel inadequate, unimportant, or unnoticed; may feel different, and thus feel that he or she does not belong. I know there are people here at PBCC who feel that, and my heart goes out to you.

The other problem is to feel that another person doesn't belong:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." (1 Cor 12:21)

To say, "I have no need of you" is really another way of saying, "you don't belong with me; you're not important; you're not worth my time."

Paul's answer to both is the same: God has deliberately arranged the church like this, as one body with many parts, so that we belong together:

But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (6:18-20)

But God has so composed the body...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. (12:25-26)

The church should be the most diverse of all communities, and it should also be the most belonging of all communities. Sadly this

is often not the case. Martin Luther King, Jr, said, “It is appalling that the most segregated hour of Christian America is eleven o’clock on Sunday morning.” Sadly this is still true. This segregation is no longer necessarily racial. It happens whenever churches are homogenous.

Does church matter to us? It should, for we are not just individuals. We are a community, part of a much larger community through time and space. We are a community that collectively tries to belong together and follow Christ together.

2.2.3. In relation to the world

Thirdly, we remind ourselves who we are in relation to the world. As the Lord’s people, we are for the Lord’s sake. As a body, we are for one another’s sake. We are also for the world’s sake. The church should be good for the world. The church should be a blessing to the world. But a common narrative is that the church is bad for the world, that it is responsible for many of the world’s ills. We are called to love one another. But we also seek to reach beyond the circle of the church to love others. We who belong to the Lord and are learning how to belong together are also to be for the sake of those beyond who don’t belong. How can we be for the good of the world, beginning with our local neighborhood? Can we contribute to the common good? Does the church matter to the world? Does PBCC matter to Blaney Avenue, to Cupertino, to the South Bay? God wants it to matter.

Last week our Missions Fair provided an opportunity to learn about some of the ways PBCC is engaged in outreach, seeking to be a blessing to the world, beginning with Collins Elementary School just down the street, and extending to the other side of the world.

Our services are consciously shaped around the twin ideas of gathering and sending. We gather together to remember the past, to pay attention to the narrative that constitutes us. In the present we reaffirm our allegiance and our identity: we are “in Christ.” We are Christ-followers, and we give him our allegiance. We are gathered together as a people, seeking how to belong together. Then we are sent, facing the future in hope that God is at work in us and through us, with aspirations for each one of us individually, for our community, and for our world. Does church matter? Both “gather” and “sent” assume that church does matter.

There is a second part of the statement in the worship guide each week: “Our desire is to praise God and receive afresh his Spirit in us, to affirm that we are family reconciled one to another, and to be empowered to reach out to the world.” We are gathered and then sent.

3. Communion

Buzz Aldrin was an elder of a Presbyterian church outside Houston. After the Eagle touched down on the moon, he took communion, he celebrated the Lord’s Supper. He wanted a symbol that transcended the electronics and computers and rockets, that recognized there was something beyond the incredible scientific and engineering achievement of landing men on the moon. So he took up with him bread, wine and a small chalice given by his church. He read John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit, for you can do nothing without me.” After taking the elements, he “sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the church everywhere.”

So, we will take communion together, participating in this practice of commitment to the idea of church and to the one whose gathered people we are.

We have gathered. Now be sent with this blessing:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Rom 15:3)

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