



SUNDAY SERMON

## Yes, We're Still the Church

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About two months ago a vestry member asked an insightful question at last April's vestry meeting. A question that I had been noodling with myself but didn't quite have the clarity or courage to say out loud yet. This person, with strength and a clear eyed sense of our current situation asked a question that resonated deeply. I don't remember the exact words they used but I heard the question this way: If we cannot gather as a people for Sunday worship at St. Columba's, what are we? Do we continue to be St. Columba's Church?

Packed into this question was the swirl of personal longing, as well as the larger existential question regarding the nature of the church. I live for questions like this – questions that envelop the hearer and take weeks to unpack.

This was my experience with this particular question – Without being able to gather, will we continue to be St. Columba's Church? Upon hearing this question asked, I knew it necessitated a nuanced answer, yet the only answer that I could discern was Yes. Yes, this scattered group of people meeting online for digital worship *can still the church*. While I knew the answer was Yes - I didn't then know how or why I knew this.

Nothing I learned in my seminary studies taught me that church could still be the church without its worshipping body gathering together weekly for worship. In fact, I pretty much was taught the opposite. There was a brilliant 20<sup>th</sup> century Orthodox priest and liturgical scholar named Alexander Schmemmann who articulated brilliantly that weekly services begin the minute the people start gathering together. For so many of us, we think that the service begins when the prelude, opening hymn or opening prayer starts but this is faulty thinking. Church is already happening before a single musical or liturgical element takes place. The people coming together – that's when the church begins. By locating the worship's beginning not in any part of the service, but in the people's presence Schmemmann highlights the reality that we claim and forget all the time – we don't go to church; we are the church.

Such thinking is grounded in the writings of Scripture. As many of you know, we get the word "Church" from the Greek word Ekklesia. Ekklesia doesn't neatly translate into the English "church" as we know the word today. Ekklesia means "a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place." It's worth noting that Ekklesia was not a uniquely Christian term at the time that the Biblical writers were using it. There were even non-Christian Ekklesias in the Roman empire. What constituted an ekklesia was not where people were gathered, but that they were gathered at all.

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### DATE

Pentecost 2  
Sunday, June. 14, 2020

### PREACHER

The Rev. Amy Molina Moore

So you can imagine my distress at the beginning of this quarantine and why the question of whether we can still be the church without gathering resonated with me. Pretty much everything that I've been taught about the nature of church and the power of liturgy, took as a given that the work of being the church should always and would always be done in the context of a gathered people.

So I turn the question to you - Are we, can we still be the church? Take a moment to ponder this question and share your answer with someone next to you or in the chat box during our 11 o'clock service.

It has been two months that I've been wrestling with this question. Will we continue to be St. Columba's church without gathering together in person for worship? More generally – does the church exist whilst her people are scattered? As is true in most things in life, I found an answer to this question somewhere I had not expected to find it. Even less surprising – the answer was in a book. In "The Third Reconstruction: How a moral movement is overcoming the politics of division and fear;" The Reverend Dr. William Barber II spends some time exploring the nature of the church and her relationship to society at large. He locates the significance and power of the church not in a physical space, but in the realm of vision. The church at her best, offers society resources, language and courage to hope that tomorrow will a better, more just day. He writes – "Only if the church is the church can people see that another way is possible. Without [the church's] alternative witness, we are tempted to think that the way things are is simply the way things have to be. . . The Holy Spirit works to bring us together, making possible a way of life that none of us could pursue or even imagine on our own. This calling together – ekklesia in Greek – is what the New Testament calls "church."

Reverend Barber introduces a new way to view the church – not merely as a people connected and gathered by a worshipping community, but as a people who know the stories; people who've been taught that nothing is impossible for God; people who follow in the way of Jesus the Christ who showed the world that the way things are, is not the way things have to be.

Jesus affirmed this truth, but it did not originate with him. It's been there since the beginning. Our Genesis passage this morning attests to that.

Sarah and Abraham could not have a baby together. The writer here wants us to really get how incredibly impossible it is for Sarah to have a baby. In multiple ways they let it be known that Sarah cannot have babies. She stopped getting her period. She's old. And she and Abraham don't even have intimate relations anymore. Sarah's barrenness is just the way things are, but in steps God and "the way things are" is completely transformed into "the way things could be." I can't think of a more hopeful message than this for society today.

As we look all around us at the civil unrest about long standing racial inequality in our society the church has a unique and important role to play. We are the ones who know the stories. We are the ones who know that the way things are, are not the way things have to be. We are the ones who can encourage and inspire others to make this same claim for themselves.

Rather than fearing that the church will cease to exist, I see her alive every day in far flung places. This modern day justice movement has galvanized a whole lot of people who are crying out for justice, for equality, for kindness and for the end of abusive narratives that deny the inherent

loveliness of every one of God's creatures. In this, each one of us has a role to play. It is time for us to unlearn the lessons that we've been taught about the way things are. It's time for us to remember who we are. We are the people, gathered by God in our respective homes, who pray and profess every week that the way things are, is not the way things have to be. The world needs us. Now let's get to it. Amen.