

Members of Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Seattle received a special an-announcement in the mail listing the many things that would be done for them at church on what was to be called “No-excuse-to-stay-at-home-Sunday.” By the announcement, cots would be available for those who say Sunday is their day to sleep in. Eye drops would be supplied for those who stayed up watching late-night TV. Steel helmets would be avail-able for those who say the roof would cave in if they ever went to church. Blankets were there for those who said the church is always too cold, and hand-held batter y fans for those who say it’s too hot. Microwave dinners were ready in the kitchen for those who say they can’t go to church and cook dinner, too. Finally, the sanctuary would be decora-ted with both red poinsettias and white lilies create a familiar setting for those who have never seen the church without them.

Of course, this is a silly, sarcastic illustration of sad commentary on the church, and why many people don’t think it’s important. I want you to understand--not for the first time from me--but understand why there is a certain necessity to the church. First, it must be said--in spite of our terminology--church is not something you go to. And church is not something one joins like a club, with privileges and rules that admit some and exclude others. The Church is the creation of God. It is a movement--a revolutionary movement--founded and empowered by God through Jesus Christ. It is something being constructed, as when Jesus said to Peter after his confession that Jesus was the Christ, “*You are right, Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church -- [my revolution]--and the gates of hell [death] will not destroy it,*” (Mt 16:16).

In that, the church differs from every other human organization. Sadly,

sometimes it doesn't act like it and perhaps too much of our experience hasn't seemed to be what Jesus said it was. Yet, it is true nonetheless. And the reality Jesus said it was can still be known and experienced. For it is a matter of the living God's acting in our midst. You see, the church is first and foremost a witness to the reality of what God is doing. The church has a distinct witness to God. It is not enough to just believe God exists. Jesus came into a world where there was plenty of belief in God as existing. What was revolutionary about Jesus' teaching was his claim that God is in motion--distinctly and power-fully in motion--and specifically and in a new way through, in, and by him--Jesus. God has an agenda, and that agenda is unfolding through Jesus in the world. Jesus' life and teaching was that it was not merely enough to believe in the God of Creation. "Now you need to believe that that God is also the God of New Creation--the New Creation of what God is doing in the world," he was saying. Part of that was Jesus himself. But the other part--as Jesus' own words say and what we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians--yes, the church, the extension of Jesus himself in the world. See God, see Jesus, see the church. They are all intertwined. That's the necessary witness and place of the church--to the God of Creation and New Creation in our midst.

Secondly, as flows from the first, the church bears witness to the unique life, teaching, death and resurrection of this same Jesus. First, the witness of the church of Jesus Christ is to God's love. Sad to say, many people's Christianity thinks like this: "*God loves me because I have accepted or believe in Jesus.*" Such a thinking puts us first, "*God loves because I love first.*" Nothing could be further from the truth of the Gospel. The Gospel is, "*I love because God loves me.*" 1 John says so explicitly: "*In*

this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins,” (4:10). Of course we may think of John 3:16. Paul also, “*But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us,*” (Rom 5:8). Yet even more clearly still, 2 Corinthians 5:19, “*in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*” Hear that--“*not counting their trespasses against them.*” Yet, so much Christian so-called “evangelization” turns on just the opposite: “God is holding you ac-countable, so you’d better trust Jesus before it’s too late! Your eternity depends upon it!” That is not the gospel of Jesus, John, or Paul. There is an urgency to the Gospel, but a threatening message is not it. It’s the excitement and grace of what God is up through Jesus--by whom, God is moving in the world, to, as Paul said in Ephesians, “*to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things in earth,*” or as we sing it in the old hymn, “*and earth and heaven be one.*”

New Testament scholar writes of the popular misunderstanding of the Gospel this way: “*We have swapped our biblical heritage of new heavens and new earth for a form of [Greek teaching] (‘going to heaven for eternity’ [as salvation] but not in Paul!). We have swapped the biblical vocation of humans--to be a kingdom and priests--for a moral contract in which most the most important thing is whether we’ve passed the moral exam, and if we haven’t what can be done about it. Therefore we have swapped the rich biblical account of what Jesus’ death achieved for a slimmed-down version which can easily be ‘heard’ [wrongly] to say that an angry God took out his bad temper on his own son...which is the sort of thing pagan religion might say. So we have [Greeked] our [Christian hope for the future]...moralized our self-under-standing as humans*

(anthropology), and endangered with pagan thinking the meaning of salvation.

Fortunately, the Bible itself will get us back on track.”

For the God that Jesus witnesses to is “our Father” who he teaches us to pray with gladness in the Lord’s Prayer. This is a God who makes his rain and sunshine fall on the just and unjust, and has sent his Son to proclaim his infinite love, and reconcile us and the world into the goodness and harmony it was always meant to have. God is not satisfied with the world arrangement as it is. But he is not going to destroy the world because of sin, suffering, and death. He is remaking it, renewing it, restoring it, and ultimately re-creating it--as we sing in the hymn, “*God’s re-creation of the New Day.*” Jesus is part of that--and it began with his own life and ministry, his healings, miracles, ministry of grace to all who would have it, and then in power by his Resurrection, Ascension, and Session to reigning Lord-ship over all. Again, God has an agenda and Jesus is it--but so is the church part of that agenda--again, as Paul has put it (2 Cor), “*that we might embody God’s faithfulness to his covenant of renewal,*” (5:21).

So third, flowing out of the first and second, the church--Jesus’ Church--is in-tended as a special community in the world. The Church is God’s revolution, it is a witness to Jesus Christ, and it is a special community. From our Protestant heritage, Presbyterians and others have emphasized the teaching that the church is a priesthood of believers. Medieval Catholicism had put a great divide between the common people and the church’s priesthood. The 16th century Reformer Martin Luther recaptured the New Testament teaching that our Savior Jesus Christ had by his cross opened up a way of equal access to God’s grace for every Christian. Yet, in recapturing that teaching, Luther was also recapturing the whole Biblical teaching that God made human beings in

the beginning as his priests. A priest is someone who stands both for God to others and for others to God--an intermediary. Luther understood that because of Jesus Christ--God's intermediary for us all--we by him become God's priests again--serving and ministering for God in the world, and for others to God. It's what John in Revelation says, "*To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving our God and Father,*" (Rev 1:6).

Now, yes, in the church as organized there are people ordained for ministry as we say. But that is--by our understanding--in order to have a well-ordered church in carrying out preaching, teaching, the sacraments, pastoral care, and church order. But in reality, all Christians are ministers and priests. All of us are by the Spirit of Christ endowed with both his Spirit and gifts for ministry. Part of God's agenda given to us all by Christ him-self is the ministry, again to quote Paul, "*the ministry of reconciliation,*" (2 Cor 5:17-21). And by that, then, Luther said, "*As Christ bore our sins, we are to bear one another's sins,*"--that is, as Christ has loved us, we are to love one another. No Christian can be a mere spectator to our neighbor's tragedies. We are to share the burdens, forgive the sins, relieve the hurting, bind up the wounded, and shelter the stranger. As that special community in the world, we thus have a common life--a common faith, a common commitment, a common hope, a common agenda. The church is not meant to be--as clubs are--an aggregate of individuals. It is meant to be a community that shares a common life and strengthens each other in faith, hope, and love. This is part of the necessity of the church.

Of course, this takes work and commitment. In our times, we are all pulled in so many different directions. We have so much around us in terms of material things, and

have so many opportunities to be other places and do other things than concern ourselves with “church.” Church becomes for many just one more “thing,” we can take or leave. Many feel little obligation, in part because, either the way we have come to misunderstand what the church is intended to be about, or because of what it has often become in many places. This is a huge challenge in our time for us all. But keeping God’s agenda for the church in view can help strengthen our purpose and resolve for the church.

Fourth, the church--that is the church’s life--ought to be the envy of those not part of it and a treasure for those who are. People should experience in the fellowship and atmosphere of the church community things that are sadly lacking in much of contemporary life. Part of the agenda of the church is to demonstrate the reality of God and Christ in the world. The church should be experienced as that place where people find others both trusting and struggling with God. It is to be that place where there is practiced the forgiveness of sins and invites others to understand the wonder of what that means. One ancient theologian--a very strong, self-disciplined moralist--taught that the church was “*a society of the righteous*”--Tertullian. A contemporary of his--much more aware of his own failings--countered with, “*No, the church is a hospital for sinners*”--Augustine. Too often, the church has acted like the former, because it was afraid to be thought like the latter. Yet, the latter is exactly what the church is properly. Part of the agenda of the church of Jesus is to be a community where people can both find a gracious God and find their sins forgiven and their lives strengthened for God’s purposes.

Yes, there is a necessity of the church. Necessity--by God’s intention, by

Christ's establishment, and by our participation in it as the Body of Christ for the world. This is the will of God for the world. This is how God is renewing, restoring, and re-creating all things--to bring heaven and earth together. This is what we--as the Church--are intended, ordained, and empowered for. It is no wonder that Teresa of Avila was so right when she said: "*Christ has no body on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless us now.*" When we take such an understanding seriously, we begin to see the necessity of the Church. Amen.