

"TWO THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT THE CHURCH"

INTRODUCTION The Apostle Paul, at the end of his letter to the Romans, sent his personal greetings to several of his friends, among them two of his oldest and dearest friends, Priscilla and Aquilla, and then he went on to say this: "Give my love to the little church that meets in their house".

It's a beautiful line, and it suggests several things to me to remember about the Church, and I'm going to set two of those things before you this morning, more in the manner of a meditation in the midst of this Communion Service on Pentecost than in the manner of a sermon. And Paul said, "Give my love to the little church that meets in their house".

THE CHURCH BEGAN IN A SIMPLE WAY The first thing it suggested to me was this: that the church began in a very simple way. It began as a group of people meeting together in somebody's house, and meeting for the sole purpose of remembering their friend and master, Jesus, who had died, risen and disappeared into the heavens.

There was no minister, that is, no one set apart to lead the congregation. There was in all probability a leader - perhaps the oldest person in the group, or the owner of the house in which they were meeting, or perhaps someone who had known Jesus personally. Such a person presided over the gathering.

And then, too, there was no formal service. The service went as the spirit led it. There were prayers, probably Jewish prayers, prayers that some of them might have learned as children in the Synagogue. There was no profession of any creed because there wasn't any creed; they hadn't had time to develop any formal statements of belief. When a person was baptized into the group he was asked to confess that "Jesus is Lord" - that was all the creed there was.

And there was no reading of the Bible in the sense that we read it here this morning, at least no reading from the Gospel or from an Epistle, because these for the most part had not yet been written. They may have had letters to read and to share, letters addressed to them by some of the leaders in the church. These were read and shared in small groups.

There was no sermon in the sense that we have it today, and I'm sure that many of you would be delighted if we were to follow them in this particular phase of worship. To be sure, there were probably personal reminiscences of Jesus, but no sermon in the sense that we have them today.

And above all, there wasn't any organization - no officers, no administrative board, no committees, nor organizations, no annual conference, no general conference - none of the "machinery" that you and I normally associate with the Church.

Of course as time went on the church grew and things became a bit more complex. Soon it had to have an ordered ministry. That is, the church could not run the risk of letting anyone who wanted to assume leadership to do so. It had to have an ordered ministry in the sense that it was trained and set apart and commissioned by the Christian community.

And its worship services gradually became more and more formal. For instance, they found that they couldn't run the risk of letting just anybody

get up and lead the meeting in prayer, and so the prayers began to assume a shape and pattern. And the preaching not only had to proclaim the Gospel, but also reach the unconverted, the agnostics, the intellectuals, and the people who were the lost followers of the myths of Rome and Greece, the people who were tired of the old religion. In order to fulfill such functions, the preachers had to be pretty well prepared.

And the teaching of the Church - its fundamental message - had to be put in some transmissible form. Interested outsiders who wanted to know what the faith was all about needed something brief, concise and generally agreed upon. The creeds of the fourth century were the natural response to such a need.

And the organization of the church became more complicated and complex. As it grew in size, it also had to be managed. Two people can live without much in the way of organization, but two hundred and two thousand cannot. Rules and regulations were the result; means and ways were devised in order to keep things running. And so the church, as it got larger, expanded its machinery, its organization.

CHURCH CANNOT GO BACK, BUT The church, of course, cannot go back to its original simplicity any more than a man with many duties and responsibilities cannot go back to the simple and uncomplicated years of his childhood. You wouldn't want him to, and you wouldn't want the church to try to go back to the simple ways of the first century.

But, on the other hand, I believe that if the church loses that simplicity entirely, it can lose something vital. It's like losing sight of the forest for the trees.

Its worship services must have some degree of formality in order to protect the things we treasure the most, and this is why we have ritual, liturgy - to prevent careless handling of the treasures of our faith, but - on the other hand - the simpler we keep the worship, the more real it is likely to be.

The simpler the machinery can be, the less people are likely to be crushed in the meshes of its wheels. The simpler the doctrine, the more it is likely to penetrate and be understood by people. Dean Pike use to say we need "fewer beliefs and more belief"....in referring to the doctrine of the Church.

I become uneasy when I see the church through the years, at least some parts of the church, adding superstructure to superstructure, and becoming more complicated in its organization, its ritual and ceremony, its doctrine. The Christian Church began in a very simple way and the simpler we keep it, the more vital it is likely to be, and the less chance of the spirit being suffocated and **suppressed**....less chance of losing sight of the real thing.

THE CHURCH IS RELATED TO LIFE The second thing I wanted to touch upon this morning is this: the church ought always to be related - closely related - to life.

Said Paul, "Give my love to the little church that meets in their home". Think about this. The danger in many cases is that the church and the home are completed separated. There are a great many people who do not feel at all embarrassed to say their prayers in church, but who would feel awkward if someone were to suggest that they say their prayers together in a group in their home.

People are usually good when they come to church. They put on their best manners, but they're not always on their best behavior at home. People come to a church and profess their beliefs in all sincerity, and yet those same beliefs seem to have little relevancy to what they're doing in their homes or places of work.

Most people are quiet and reverent inside a church; they move around in it as though it were some sacred place, and yet sometimes they do not hesitate at all to trample on life outside of the church in order to get what they want.

A great many people find God in church. That is, they feel something here in a place such as this, something they need, that helps them, and yet - so many times, in the tangles and tension of their own domestic life, they do not feel that power and sometimes they don't look for it because they have no idea that they would ever find it in their own home.

NOT SO IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

It was not so in New Testament times. The secular and sacred were bound up in the same bundle of life. The church met in their homes and the home is the cradle of life.

Nothing would do more to make our faith more related to life than to have simple prayer services in our apartments once a week. As we read the Bible together....and pray together....in a simple setting....outside the walls of the Church, the reality of worship can be deepened.

Back when I was in my early twenties, I was travelling one Summer through Europe and parts of Asia Minor with an American friend who was also studying for the ministry. Whenever it was possible for us on a Sunday, we would seek out a Protestant Church Service - Anglican, or Lutheran, or Presbyterian, or Methodist. When we couldn't find a Protestant Church service, then we would go to a Mass in one of the Roman Catholic Churches, but this wasn't altogether satisfactory for two Protestant seminarians. Our Latin was weak. I remember once Sunday morning after we had been to a Catholic Mass in Florence, how we decided to supplement our spiritual nourishment by reading our Bibles together - out loud and having prayer together. We had never done it before and we had known each other for eight or ten months at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. At first, both of us felt awkward and a bit uneasy....but as the Summer went on, I think we both came to experience the meaning and power of our faith in a very moving way - in hotel rooms, in youth hostels, in private homes - taking the time to read the Bible together and to pray together without any of the things that normally surround us in our worship in Church.

I believe that if you and I can make the church come alive and active in our homes in that fashion, it is likely that we will come to the point where we think of Christianity not so much in terms of what we do here on a Sunday morning for 60 minutes or more, in a sanctuary like this, but rather in terms of what we do in our homes, or offices in the course of the week. And this will be to the good.

CLOSING

This is the day in our church year that we call Pentecost and we think of the church on this day. Some call it Whitsuntide. Some regard it as the birthday of the Church. And in a sense, the church began on Pentecost when a group of people who responded to Jesus as Lord were bound together in a body. It all began in a very simple way, and it is always related to life. Said Paul, "Give my love to the little church that meets in their house".

PRAYER We thank you, O God, for the Church that has met in various places
down through the ages -

Sometimes in great cathedrals,
Sometimes in the open fields,
Sometimes in the catacombs,
Sometimes in the homes and apartments of those who have been
drawn to Jesus and who have found in Him
the greatest revelation of yourself.

Help us to recover in our lives the thing that makes the church its real
self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the living Christ into our
homes, schools, offices....wherever we may walk in the days of this coming week.

Gather us together, Lord, in the fellowship of your faithful people. May
we never forget what the church has done for our world and for us. Keep us
mindful of the fact that we are the Church! And that if we cease to grow,
if we become stiff and shy and awkward when it comes to telling others about
you, if we let the flames die, the church dies with us.

Pardon our failures, O God, and give to each of us the will and the
power and concern to keep alive the ministry of Jesus in our world. In His
name and spirit, we pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, June 6, 1976

HOLY COMMUNION

It is the custom of our Church to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion on the first Sunday of each month. For the benefit of visiting friends, we do like to announce that the Table of our Lord is open to all - one does not have to be a member of this parish, nor of this denomination in order to receive the Sacrament.

We would invite and encourage all of you to receive the Sacrament this hour and trust that the time for you may be an occasion of spiritual renewal....of re-dedication of your life to the will of God as we find it in the person of Jesus Christ. The elements will be distributed to you in the pews. Upon receiving them, please hold them until all have received and then together - as one family of faith - we shall commune.

VISITORS

We greet the visitors in the congregation this morning. We're delighted to have you with us and we hope, of course, that the opportunity will be ours to greet you in a more personal way following this service - either at the door or at the coffee fellowship downstairs in the CR. Sign one of our guest books. Be free in the sharing of your name with us. Join us on other Sundays.

You will note ~~from~~ the bulletin that the customary coffee hour is not being held today. However, there is some coffee available and I picked up some coffee cakes for the hungry....and hope that many of you will pause for a bit of informal fellowship together. Note that the Administrative Board will be meeting at 12:30 and we hope that we may tend to the business at hand on be on our way by 1:30..

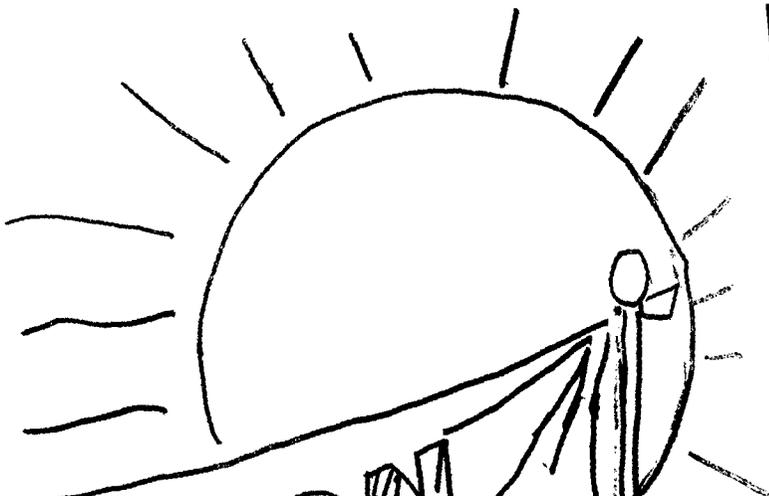
Our church is sharing in the sponsorship of a Vacation Bible School with Brick Church, HR, and Immanuel Lutheran Church. It begins a week from tomorrow and will run for two weeks and the Brick Church, 62 E. 92nd Street. Speak to me or to Mrs. Nespole or Miss Ernst if you would like to enroll your child. Kindergarten - 6th grade.

The response to the Workshop on Prayer of this past Thursday was quite good. We are most grateful to those who helped to plan it, promote it.... especially a word of appreciation goes to Mrs. Robert Heckart for all she did to bring it together. Cynthia did the major share of work and we are most grateful to her.fine evening for the 20 to 25 who studied the dynamics of prayer.

WELCOME

It's always good to welcome Paul Russell to our service. Mr. and Mrs. Russell, as you know, live in Lakeville, Conn. Former chairman of the Trustees and our LR to Annual Conference, Mr. Russell, more than any other person was instrumental for turning things around here in this church back in those difficult years of the 1950 and 1960's....He left us with a legacy of many, many good works.

JESUS SAID: More blessed to give than to receive. In this spirit....



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TWO THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

The Apostle Paul, at the end of his letter to the Romans, sent his personal greetings to several of his friends among them two of his oldest and dearest friends - Priscilla and Aquilla, and then he went on to say this: "Give my love to the little church that meets in their house". It's a beautiful line, and it's a line that caught my attention suggesting several things to me to remember about the church, and I am going to set two of those things before you this morning, more in the manner of a meditation in the midst of this Communion Service on Pentecost than in the manner of a sermon. And Paul said: "Give my love to the little church that meets in their house"

THE CHURCH BEGAN IN A SIMPLE WAY

The first thing it suggested to me was this: that the church began in a very simple way. It began as a group of people meeting together in somebody's house, and meeting for the sole purpose of remembering their friend and master, Jesus, who had died, risen, and disappeared into the heavens. There was no minister, that is, no one set apart to lead the congregation. There was in all probability a leader - perhaps the oldest person in the group, or the owner of the house in which they were meeting, or perhaps someone who had known Jesus personally, or perhaps someone who had gifts of leadership. Such a person presided over the meeting.

And then too, there was no formal service. The service went as the spirit led it. There were prayers, probably Jewish prayers, prayers some of them might have learned as children in the Synagogue. There was no profession of any creed because there wasn't any creed; they hadn't had time to develop any formal statement of belief. When a person was baptized into the group he was asked to confess that "Jesus is Lord". That was all the creed there was. And there was no reading of the Bible in the sense that we read it here this morning, at least no reading from the Gospel or from an Epistle, because these for the most part had not yet been written. They may have read letters that were addressed to them and written by some of the leaders in the church, and these letters were read and shared in the small groups. There was no sermon in the sense that we have it today, and I'm sure that many of you would be delighted if we were to follow them in this particular phase of their worship. To be sure, there were probably personal reminiscences of Jesus, but no sermon in the sense that we have it today. And above all, there wasn't any organization - no official board, no woman's society, no trustees, no annual conference - none of the machinery that you and I normally associate with the church.

Of course as time went on the church grew and things became a bit more complex. Soon it had to have an ordered ministry. That is, the church could not run the risk of letting anyone who wanted to assume leadership to do so. It had to have an ordered ministry in the sense that it was trained and set apart and commissioned by the Christian community. And its worship services gradually became more and more formal. For instance, they found that they couldn't run the risk of letting just anybody get up and lead the meeting in prayer, and so the prayers began to assume a shape, length and pattern. The preaching had to not only proclaim the Gospel, but it also had to reach the unconverted, the agnostics, intellectuals, and the people who were the lost followers of the myths of Rome and Greece, the people who were disillusioned with the old religion. The preaching had to fulfill that function in the

church and so the preachers had to be prepared. And the teaching or the fundamental message of the church had to be put in some transmissible form. Interested outsiders who wanted to know what Christianity was all about needed something brief, concise and generally agreed upon. The creeds were the natural response to that need. And the organization of the church became more and more complicated; as it grew in size, it also had to be managed. Two people perhaps can live without much organization, but two thousand cannot. They have to have rules and regulations and they must make means and ways so that they don't run into one another all the time. And so the church, as it got larger, expanded its machinery and its organization.

The Church, of course, cannot go back to its original simplicity any more than a man with manifold duties and responsibilities cannot go back to the simple and uncomplicated years of childhood. You wouldn't want him to, and you wouldn't want the church to try to go back to the simplicities of its early years. But on the other hand, I think, if the church loses that simplicity entirely, it loses something vital. I'm convinced of this, and of course not everyone feels quite as strongly on this as I do, but I am convinced that the more simple we can keep the church, the more vital it is likely to be. Its worship services must have some element of formality on the one hand in order to protect the things we treasure the most, and this is why we have ritual and liturgy - to prevent haphazard and careless handling of the great treasures of our faith, but on the other hand the simpler we keep the worship, the more real it is likely to be. And the simpler the machinery can be, the less people are likely to be crushed in the meshes of its wheels. I think one of the great tasks of the church in this day and age is to keep people home and not to be bringing them out to the church six out of seven nights of the week. Personally I feel that the church ought only to have those organizations and activities going on within its walls that are necessary for its own welfare, and for the interior lives of its people. And the simpler its doctrine, the more surely it is likely to penetrate the minds of people, and I for one am fearful when I see the church through the years, at least some parts of the church, adding superstructure to superstructure, and becoming more and more complicated in its ritual, ceremony and ministry, and its organization. The Christian Church began in a very simple way and the simpler we keep it, the more vital it is likely to be.

THE CHURCH IS CLOSELY RELATED TO LIFE

And the second thing that I wanted to touch upon here this morning is this - the church ought always to be closely related to life. "The church that meets in their house" The danger in so many instances is that the church and the home are completely separated. There are a great many people who do not feel at all embarrassed to say their prayers in church but who would be very embarrassed if someone were to suggest that they say their prayers together in a group in their home. People are usually good when they come to church; they put on their best manners, but they are not always good and not always polite to people in their own homes or in their own offices. People profess their beliefs in church and profess them in all sincerity, and yet those beliefs sometimes seem to have little, if any, relationship to what they are doing in their homes or places of business. Most people are reverent and quiet when they come to church; they move about as though they were in some sacred place, and yet sometimes they do not hesitate at all to trample on life outside of the church if that life is human and they have to crush it in order to get what they want. A great

many people find God in church; they feel something here in a place such as this, something that they need, something that helps them - and yet so many times, in the tangles of their own domestic life they do not feel that power and sometimes they don't look for it because they have no idea that they would ever find it in their own home.

It was not so in New Testament days. The secular and sacred were bound up in the same bundle of life. The church met in their homes and the home is the cradle of life. Religion had to do with their lives and they did this every day. Nothing would do more to make Christianity vivid and vital to some of you than to have a simple service in your own home or apartment once a week. Some of you do the sort of thing I have in mind occasionally, but not very many of you. I think you would be amazed, as you sat down with your own family or several of your friends and read the Bible together and prayed together without any minister and without any of the surrounding associations that you have in a church, to see how the reality of worship is quickened.

As I was thinking of this this past week, I was reminded of something that took place in my own life several summers ago. I was travelling through Europe and Asia Minor with an American friend who was also studying for the ministry. Whenever it was possible for us on a Sunday we would go to a Protestant Church Service. Of course, it wasn't always possible to find a Protestant Church. When we couldn't find one, we would go to a Mass in one of the Roman Catholic Churches, but this wasn't altogether satisfactory. I remember quite distinctly one Sunday morning after we had attended Mass in a Catholic Church in Florence, Italy, how we decided to supplement our spiritual nourishment by reading our Bibles together, out loud, and having prayer together. We had never done it before and we had known each other for some time, and I must confess to you that the first time we did it, we were both a little embarrassed. But as the summer went on, I think I have never felt the meaning and the power of our own faith more than I felt it that summer - in hotel rooms, in youth hostels, in private homes - reading it with one of my closest friends with none of the things around me that normally help me to worship. I think if you and I can make the church come alive and active in our homes in that way, it is likely that we will come to the point more and more where we think of Christianity not so much in terms of what we do here on a Sunday morning for sixty minutes, in a place like this, but in terms of what we do in our homes, our offices and the places where we spend the greater portion of our time.

This is the day in our church year that we call Pentecost and we inevitably think about the church because in one sense the church began on Pentecost when a group of individuals were bound together in a body. There are two of the things I would have you remember about the Christian church: it began in a very simple way, and it is always related to life. "Give my love" said Paul "to the little church that meets in their house".

PRAYER We thank thee, Our Father, for the church that has met in various places down through the ages, sometimes in great cathedrals, and sometimes in catacombs and help us to recover in our lives the thing that makes the church its real self, and then send us out to carry that spirit of the living Christ into our homes, offices and schools. We ask this in thy name. Amen