

# WHOSE CHURCH IS IT?

A sermon by James R Blades  
First Presbyterian Church  
San Luis Obispo CA  
November 16, 2008

In these past weeks, as I have listened earnestly for the counsel of God's Spirit for this church in this hour, my thought have gravitated to the question I asked the very first Sunday I preached here four-and-a-half years ago. Whose church is it? How would you answer?

**I. The first answer you might have thought of is this: It's Christ's church.** And you would be correct.

"We are **his** people," said the psalmist, "and the sheep of **his** pasture."<sup>1</sup>

"He is the head of the body, the church," wrote Paul.<sup>2</sup>

We are Christ's church; not the Presbytery's church, nor the pastor's church, nor the staff's church, nor session's church, nor any one committee's church. We're Christ's church.

True, at times we wonder whose church it really is, when the church seems to reflect so little of the Spirit of Jesus:

- who died to end the very kind of divisiveness the church often exhibits,
- who reached out to the very populations the church often neglects.

Yet, however imperfect, flawed and sometimes unlike the spirit of the Master, the church still belongs to Christ and is still the instrument through which He has chosen reflect His healing, reconciling, life-giving presence into this wounded and wayward world.

I draw great comfort from remembering whose church this is, that this ministry is not our production but His production, that the success of this church is not ours but His to create.

"I am the vine," said Jesus, "and you are the branches. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you will bear much fruit."<sup>3</sup> That's the formula!

Ours to listen, Christ's to lead.

Ours to search the vision, Christ's to reveal it.

Ours to step out in faith and Christ's to provide the resources.

It's His Church! Here's something else:

## **II. It's *your* church.**

"To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good," says Paul in this morning's reading.<sup>4</sup>

"*Every* part is indispensable," he says 1Corinthians.<sup>5</sup>

"For by one Spirit we were *all* baptized into one body," he says in Ephesians. "Whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, *all* were made to drink of one Spirit."

Pay close attention to the inclusive words in all declarations: *each* and *every*, and *all*.

---

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 100

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 1:18

<sup>3</sup> John 15:1ff

<sup>4</sup> chapter 12

<sup>5</sup> chapter 12

There is not single member of the body of Christ, not a single child of God whom God has not called to the ministry of His church. And that means you. In your bulletin is a list of all the marvelous ministries of this congregation. Which match your talents and passions? And if you see none, talk to us and we'll see that another ministry is created that does match them!

It's *your* church. In your time of crisis and loss, it's your church. In your time of celebration of wedding and baptism, it's your church. In your time of loneliness when you need the fellowship of God's people, it's your church. When it comes to having a voice, it's your church, whether you've been here 40 years or four months.

And when it comes to support this ministry, it is your church then too.

Here's something else:

### **III. It's *our* church.**

What happens when you get a whole bunch of people looking for a way to share their gifts and talents and perspectives and dreams in the church? Things get a bit messy. A bit chaotic. Some of the lids that used to be neatly tied down start rattling.

Proverbs 14:4 says "Where there are no oxen, the barn is clean; but much increase comes by the strength of the ox."<sup>6</sup>

It's true, isn't it? The best way to keep your barn clean is not to put any animals in it. The best way to keep your life neat and tidy is not to put any challenge in it. The best way to keep a rug from getting dirty is to roll it up and put it away in a closet. The best way to keep a church peaceful and orderly is not to have any new ideas, new initiatives, new directions, new voices, new faces.

But when the Spirit of God goes to work in a congregation, when people start to awaken to the vision of what God can do with their talents in the church, when people start voicing their dreams, comparing their perspectives, a kind of dynamic commotion emerges. It's the Spirit of God *widening the circle*.

Orchestras fascinate me. Here is this big ensemble of all kinds of different instruments with different sounds, playing different notes in different sequence; yet they all play in wonderful *harmony*! The fact that they all play different instruments that make different sounds that play different parts at different times is not a hindrance to their art; it's this very diversity that *makes* their music lavish and rich. The key is that they all play under the conductor's direction; all give attention to the conductor's baton.

And here we have this church which is awakening all kinds of different gifts and perspectives and ministries. How does the church manage such diversity? Not by insisting that all play the same note. But by staying tuned, each, to Jesus the conductor, Jesus the head of the church. When each part of the church is tuned to His Spirit, then there is harmony. Not uniformity. Not sameness. Harmony! "Varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; varieties of service but the same Lord; varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one" say Paul.<sup>7</sup>

It's his church. It's your church. It's our church. Here's something else very important:

### **IV. It's *their* church.**

---

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 14:4

<sup>7</sup> 1Corinthians 12:4-7

The people outside, out there! Their church! The people whose names are not yet on the church roles. The people who have not yet darkened these doors. Even those who have no use for religion, the irreverent and wayward. It's *their* church.

The ministry of Jesus was a scandal. Why? Because he pushed the faith outside the customary circles, outside the cloistered boundaries; he called the outsiders to come in. He made the towns and the seaside and the marketplace and the open air his parish! "These people too," he said, "are Abraham's children."

Then He turned to his disciples and said: "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Do you hear the call?

"Remember," said the writer to the Hebrews, "it was outside the city walls that Jesus suffered. **Let us go out to him there.**"<sup>8</sup>

We so often picture Jesus inside the church. If you want to meet Jesus, that's where you go. But this verse suggests Jesus is quite somewhere else too: Out there in the faces and needs and lives of folks outside these walls. "I was a stranger," he said, "and you welcomed me in."

Do you have friends who are without Christ? Neighbors? Club associates? Golf partners? Fellow students? Do you know folks who used to attend this church that drifted away and aren't attending anywhere? You don't have to be a flaming evangelist. Most of the time, it just takes a kind, simple, patient, caring welcome to pave the way in.

When I was five years old, home life was not pleasant for me. I lived with my parents in a tenement on the north side of Chicago. There was drunkenness, hostility and abuse. Day after day my life was a terror—I never knew what bad thing was going to happen next. Yet in the midst of it all, I don't remember how, I was invited to Sunday school at a nearby church and I went. It was the fall of 1957. Across all these years since, two images stick in my mind about that Sunday school. I remember that we made little cutouts of Jesus ascending into the clouds. And I remember that the teacher came to call on me at home and took a personal interest in my splintered life. That October, things got so bad at home that I was shipped off to a children's institution. When that Bible school teacher found out what'd happened, she came all the way out to the home one cold November Sunday afternoon with her whole Sunday school class to visit me. I was sick in the infirmary that day. But I looked down from the second floor window at an image I never forgot: of this teacher and her students' with their mittened hands waving up at me.

Now I never got religion at home, and never had much use for it across my growing up years. But something always attracted me to Christians. Today, I trace it back to the personal care of that one Sunday school teacher, for when I finally became a Christian my sophomore year in college, it was to that her that my thoughts turned.

I'm here today, as are many of you, not because we wandered into a church one day, but because someone invited us, made us feel welcome, made us feel that their church was our church too.

That's the theme of our stewardship and ministry in the coming year: "Widening the Circle." It will take the contribution of all of us together to do it: The sacrificial giving of all the time and talent and treasure we can muster.

---

<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 13:12-13

In the church of Jesus Christ, there are no passengers; only crew.<sup>9</sup> In these stormy and uncertain times, the call of the Captain of our souls has gone out: "All hands on deck!" And will you report for service?

---

<sup>9</sup> Borrowed from the quote: "There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew." Herbert "Marshall" McLuhan

\