

## IT'S NOT ABOUT US

Scriptures: Acts 1:1-8; 2:1-4

Pentecost celebrates the birthday of the church, which poses a question that many people ask. They don't often ask it to my face, but they ask it. Why do we need the church? If you believe in God and Jesus, isn't that enough? Why do we need to go to church?

To answer that question, I want to show you a scene from *Desperate Housewives*. I don't normally turn to *Desperate Housewives* for theological insight. I don't normally turn to *Desperate Housewives* at all. But a church member, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told me I had to watch this particular episode called "Sunday." So I rented it on DVD, and she was right. It is all about the theology of the church. Here is the opening scene of the episode.

(Play Season 4, Disc 3, episode 11: 3:48 - 5:53)

In our first scripture lesson from Acts 1, verse 6 says, "So when they had come together, they asked him [Jesus], 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?'" Did you notice what that verse said? It said, "When they had come together, they asked Jesus ..." After the resurrection Jesus is present when the disciples come together. It is a pattern in the stories of Jesus' resurrection. John's gospel says that on Easter evening the disciples were gathered together in a locked room out of fear that they might be arrested. They were afraid, but they were together, and suddenly Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." One of the disciples named Thomas wasn't there, so he missed seeing Jesus and when the other disciples told him about it, he did not believe them. But the next Sunday Thomas was there with them, and this time he too met Jesus. Jesus meets us when we gather together in his name.

The same is true of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Act 2:1 says, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." The Holy Spirit comes to the disciples when they are gathered together. Yes, you can try to learn about Jesus on your own, but you will end up learning about Jesus second hand from a culture that thinks he is an assistant to Santa Claus. The real Jesus who was sent to us by God comes to us when we gather together in his name. As Lynette and John realized, to know Jesus you need to go to church.

But the church is not just about us. It does not exist only for its members.

In his book *Craddock Stories* Fred Craddock tells about the first church he served in the eastern hills of Tennessee, near the Oak Ridge Laboratory, one of the first nuclear reactors in the United States. Craddock says that when Oak Ridge was built the little Tennessee town in which he served as pastor was suddenly overrun by construction workers who lived in hurriedly assembled trailer parks. Craddock writes,

After church one Sunday morning I asked the leaders to stay. I said to them, "Now we need to launch a calling campaign and an invitational campaign in all those trailer parks to invite those people to church." "Oh, I don't know. I don't think they'd fit in here,"

one of them said. “They’re just here temporarily, just construction people. They’ll be leaving pretty soon.” “Well, we ought to invite them, make them feel at home,” I said.

We argued about it, time ran out, and we said we’d vote next Sunday. Next Sunday, we all sat down after the service. “I move,” said one of them, “I move that in order to be a member of this church, you must own property in the county.” Someone else said, “I second that.” It passed. I voted against it, but they reminded me that I was just a kid preacher and I didn’t have a vote (p. 28).

Is Jesus just for us? That is what the disciples thought. When they came together, they said to Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel.” They wanted Jesus to establish the kingdom of God for them—the children of Israel. They were concerned that Jesus should take care of his own, which was the attitude of the people in Fred Craddock’s first church. The church is for the people who belong here, they said, the people who fit in.

But that was not Jesus’ view. In Acts 1:8 he replies, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Jesus did not just come for us. The church is not just about us. It is about all those people out there who not yet belong, who do not yet fit in.

That point is illustrated at Pentecost. When the Holy Spirit comes on the disciples, they don’t speak only in their own language, they speak of the language of foreigners. They are empowered to tell about Jesus to people outside of Israel, outside of the in-group, outside of those who already speak the language of faith. The church exists for those who are not yet here, who do not yet fit in, who do not yet know who Jesus is or who think he is an assistant to Santa Claus.

Which brings me back to *Desperate Housewives*. After the conversation with her husband, Lynette goes to her friend Bree and asks if she can go with her to Bree’s church, which just happens to be Presbyterian. Now things get interesting. At the end of the sermon, Lynette raises her hand. Bree leans over and whispers to her, “What are you doing?” Lynette says, “I want to ask a question about the sermon.” Bree hisses, “We don’t do that here, put your hand down.” But it is too late. The pastor calls on her, and Lynette says, “If God loves us, why is there so much suffering in the world.” The pastor looks at her and says, “That is a good question, and it deserves a longer answer than I can give here. Why don’t you come to the Bible Study on Tuesday night?” Lynette smiles and says, “Okay, I’m easy.” But Bree is mortified.

On Tuesday Bree meets Lynette on the porch, and here is what happens:

(Play 20:37 – 22:01)

Do you see the problem? When the church is only about satisfying ourselves, we lose sight of why it exists. The church exists for all those people in the world who are not yet part of it, who do not yet speak its language, who still have unanswered questions. If we are not open to those outside the church, we will not long continue to be a church even for ourselves.

That is what happened to Fred Craddock's first church. Fred Craddock writes that many years later he and his wife Nettie went back to visit the little church he had served in eastern Tennessee. A new interstate highway had been built through that part of the state, so they had trouble finding it, but finally... there it was. The building was still white, but it was different. Craddock writes,

The parking lot was full—motorcycles and trucks and cars packed in there. And out front, a great big sign: *Barbecue, all you can eat*. It's a restaurant, so we went inside. The pews are against a wall. They have electric lights now, and the organ pushed over into the corner. There are all these aluminum and plastic tables, and people sitting there eating barbecued pork and chicken and ribs—all kinds of people. ... I said to Nettie, "It's a good thing this is not still a church, otherwise these people couldn't be in here" (p. 29).

The church is not about us, because we are not the only ones who need it. The disciples wanted Jesus to give the kingdom of God to them, but it is not just for them. It is for the whole world, and if we are not willing to share it, we cannot enter it.

Near the end of that episode of *Desperate Housewives*, Bree goes to Lynette and asks her to come back to their church. She does it, because she wants to impress the minister, but Lynette helps her see that something deeper is at stake. Here is what happens:

(Play 35:37 – 37:12)

The church must be a place where people can come with questions and not just answers, where they can come with problems and not just solutions, where their hearts can be moved by contemporary music or jazz and not just classical music, or conversely where they can be moved by classical music and not just contemporary. In the words of our mission statement we must be a church "welcoming all people wherever they are in their relationship to Christ and helping them grow in that relationship," because if we aren't we will not long continue to be a church.

- Ken Onstot  
May 31, 2009