

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Easter 4, Series A
Saturday, May 6th, 2017
Sunday, May 7th, 2017

Sermon: Not Perfect...Yet

Text: Acts 2:42-47

Focus Statement: God's Church is found wherever believers gather around Word and Sacrament.

Function Statement: That our little fellowship at Epiphany would take courage and hope.

Sermon Structure: Story-Framed

Doctrinal Locus: "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered" (AC VII, 1).

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Consumerism is one of the main features of American culture. Americans are consumers of information, food, fashion, entertainment, and automobiles. We are used to having choices about where we shop and what we buy, and we pride ourselves when we find a good bargain or dicker down the salesman on the price of a new car or TV. We're picky and choosy, and if we don't like our options, we simply take our business elsewhere.

Unfortunately, we bring this same consumer mentality into our search for the "perfect" church. Christians openly and unapologetically speak of "church shopping" and "church hopping" as they try to find a congregation that "meets their needs" or supposedly, "feeds them," by which we usually mean (if we are honest with ourselves) a church that makes us feel good about ourselves even at the expense of telling us God's honest truth *about* ourselves. What we look for in a church varies by family or individual, but pretty much we want a variety of programs and ministries for different ages and stages of life. People look for a church with a dynamic youth ministry, singles ministry, children's ministry, older adult ministry, food bank, homeless ministry, mission trips, and more. We want a pastor who is intelligent, witty, sensitive,

manly, and sweet all at the same time. We want a rocking, radio-ready praise band or a pipe organ with so many ranks of pipes it could knock your socks off: take your pick. And if this or that church doesn't offer what you're looking for, you can drive to any number of other options before you find the church that is the right fit.

All of this can be overwhelming to pastors and other church leaders, who try hard to be all things to all people while remaining faithful to Jesus and the Scriptures. Yet it can also be irritating when we feel pressured to cater to people's personal preferences instead of just focusing on the work of loving the lost and found into God's Kingdom. Sometimes churches seem to be more about programs than people, and pastors take it personally when people leave because our church's ministry doesn't seem to live up to some unrealistic expectation. No wonder, then, that so many pastors and church leaders turn to cookie cutter church growth programs with sweeping promises. At least once per day I get an e-mail advertisement from yet another organization that offers a conference or sells a book with "Five Easy Steps to Grow Your Church" or "Ten Ways to Close the Back Door."

Sometimes it seems as if churches are constantly rebranding themselves, depending on which ministry conference or leadership book their pastor just read. They trot out a new mission statement every month, and the pastor or church board regularly announces the "new direction" God is leading them. No matter the denomination, whether you are Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, or Methodist, you can try to be a Purpose Driven Church, a Simple Church, a Sticky Church, a missional church, a confessional church, an authentic church, a relevant church, or an emerging church. And if you really want to be a happening place, why not just throw out your theology and all your traditions?! In fact, maybe you don't even need to talk about Jesus or sin

anymore! After all pastors are often people pleasers, and the highest law of consumerism is “Give the people what they want.”

In the consumer culture of 21st century America, church and ministry have become more about marketing and showmanship than discipleship. And so, across denominations, various restorationists talk about the need to “get back to basics.” They may even talk about becoming “an Acts 2” church again. What do they mean by that? Well, take a look at our lesson for today:

“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42-47, ESV).¹

Wow! Does this picture of the early Church in Jerusalem amaze you? It amazes me. The people were excited to hear and learn God’s Word (“devoted... to the apostles’ teaching”). They shared their life together in Christ, both inside and outside of worship. Because “fellowship” doesn’t just mean chitchatting in the narthex over coffee and donates. Fellowship means living life *together* as followers of Jesus at church, at home, at work, at school. The early disciples were regular at the Lord’s Supper—they broke bread *daily* in their homes. And they devoted themselves to prayer.

What’s more, there wasn’t a needy person among them because they willingly sold everything they had and held all their property in common (cf. Acts 4:32-35). Their solution to poverty wasn’t food drives, clothes closets, or government programs. The simple answer was just to take care of each other, sell their earthly possessions, and pool their resources. No, it

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

wasn't "Christian communism," as I've heard some people suggest. Communism and socialism are compulsory. They did it *willingly*—and joyfully—for the sheer joy of Jesus.

And what was the remarkable result of this way of "doing" church? *Growth!* Luke tells us that "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). The Acts 2 church loved the Lord, loved the Word, loved each other, and the Church just grew and grew! So that's the answer, isn't it? Acts 2 is the perfect church! And if we could just be more like the Acts 2 church, Epiphany Lutheran would grow and grow and grow and be the best house of worship in the entire town of Castle Rock, right?!

Wrong! Despite the idyllic description, the early Church in Jerusalem was anything but perfect. And if you read on in the Book of Acts, you find that to be true. In Acts 5, we discover that not all of the church members believed in the whole enterprise of prayer-care-share. When other people started selling their houses and land and laying the proceeds from the sales at the apostles' feet (4:34-37), a couple by the name of Ananias and Sapphira decided to keep some of the money for themselves. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with that, except that they boasted they were going to give everything to the church. Instead, they lied to Pastor Pete and cheated on their stewardship commitment. God punished them and struck them dead. And Luke writes, "And great fear came upon the whole church..." (Acts 5:11). Um, *yeah!* I think that's probably one of the biggest understatements in Scripture! Of *course*, the people were afraid when God killed the lying, scheming Ananias and Sapphira. Why? Because some of them were probably doing the same thing!

Then you get to Acts 6 and find out that prejudice and discrimination were causing problems. In the earliest days of Christianity, nearly all believers were Jewish. But not all of them spoke Hebrew or Aramaic, the languages of the Jewish people. Some of them spoke

Greek, and the Greek-speakers (“Hellenists”) were seen as second class Christians by the rest of the church. So when the daily food distribution happened, the Greek-speaking widows didn’t get their full share, and this caused conflict and resentment until the apostles appointed seven deacons to deal with the matter.

But the racist attitudes in the Church weren’t stamped out just like that. Things got even more complicated when Peter and Paul began to preach to Greeks and Romans and Gentiles wanted to join the church. Many of the Jewish Christians resented the food and customs of the non-Jews, who disgusted them. They insisted that before the Gentiles could be baptized and become Christians, they first had to get circumcised and become Jews! Not until the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 did this issue get settled.

And so, as you can see, the Acts 2 church was anything but perfect. Just like the American Church, they also had to deal with conflicts, misunderstandings, disappointments, unmet expectations, and hurt feelings. Why? Because the Church is full of *sinners*! We are not a museum for saints. We are a field hospital for sinners. But the Good News is that Jesus *loves* sinners. As even St. Paul himself writes, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15, NIV). The King James Version reads, “of whom I am *chief*,” which is the inspiration for the wonderful hymn: “Chief of sinners though I be, Jesus shed His blood for me...”²

I know this will probably surprise you, but even Epiphany is a church full of sinners! And because I am your pastor, I guess that makes me the sinner in chief (if I can borrow Paul’s words). No, there is no perfect church here on earth. There is no perfect pastor either. The only perfect church is the Church in heaven. And the only perfect pastor is Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

² William McComb, “Chief of Sinners Though I Be,” alt., in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 611:1.

Matthis 6

Yet that is the Good News! Jesus is the perfect Pastor, “the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25). Christ has promised to build his Church (Matt. 16:18). And let us remember that it’s *his* Church—not *your* church, not *my* church, not the Missouri Synod’s church. It is *Jesus’* Church, the bride he bought with blood and gave himself up for on the cross (Eph. 5:25). And because of Jesus’ death on the cross and his great love for the Church, he does not see us as conflicted or confused or beyond hope. He sees us as *beautiful*, full of “splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, ... holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). Jesus will build his Church because he loves her—he loves *you!* And notice that’s exactly what Luke tells us in our lesson from Acts 2. The apostles did not build the church. The programs did not make the Church grow. *Jesus* makes the Church grow: “And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47b). The Lord Jesus grew the Church because Jesus saves. That’s what his name means, and that’s what he does (Matt. 1:21). Jesus saves. He saves you. He saves me. He saved the first disciples. And he continues to save people today.

How does he do it? Very simply: through his means of grace, the Word and Sacraments. That’s what the early Church was all about, and that’s what the Church has always been about: receiving and believing in the gifts God gives us in Christ Jesus. “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The people gather together in prayer and fellowship around God’s Word (the apostles’ teaching) and the Lord’s Supper (the breaking of bread). They eat and drink and hear what Jesus gives them. They receive and believe. Jesus saves them. And the Church grows.

No, it’s not a perfect process. It’s not four easy steps to grow your church. It’s not a perfect Church either—not yet. Not until we get to heaven. Or, rather, not until the new heaven comes down to earth. But we do have a perfect Pastor. His name is Jesus. He is the Good

Matthis 7

Shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). He is the Good Pastor who bled and died and rose again... *for you*. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.