



Church Definition

The below sermon was preached at the 11:00 A.M. service on the Feast of the Pentecost, June 4, 2006, at the Cathedral Church of St. Luke and St. Paul of the Diocese of South Carolina in Charleston, SC by the Vicar, The Rev. Andrew R. O'Dell, and explores the definition of "Church."

I. William's Birthday Story

If you've been part of the Cathedral family for any amount of time, you've probably heard William's story about the little old lady in Baltimore who, every year on the Feast of Pentecost dressed herself in red and sang to William at the back of the church after the service "Happy Birthday, Dear Church". Why sing "happy Birthday Dear Church" on the feast of Pentecost? Because Pentecost, which we observe today, is the yearly celebration that Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to His disciples after He ascended into heaven, and His Spirit rested on their heads like flames of fire thus, the red stole. And that same Holy Spirit gathered those apostles together and gave the courage to go out into all the world and spread the Good News about Jesus Christ. And, let me tell you, that's a cause for celebration because without the Holy Spirit, there would be no church. It is the Holy Spirit that assembles and empowers the church of Jesus Christ today.

II. A Radical Definition of Church

But we have a problem because when you and I say the word "church" ("Why isn't the church doing anything about it?") our definition of church has little at all to do with what the Holy Spirit called together and empowered on the day of Pentecost. Now, you are going to have to decide this morning if you trust Andrew O'Dell, the person, the Christian, the priest because I am going to attempt to undo a 1600 year old definition. Ever since Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 AD with the Edict of Milan, the term "church" has come to mean structure, power, and establishment, apart from the people of God. Church is something you go to rather than something we are called to *be*. But, Beloved, when we go home this afternoon what is left behind, contrary to the way we talk, contrary to the way we've been raised to think, is not the church. What is left behind is a building. Yes, a beautiful building. Yes, a building for which we are grateful, but a *building*, not the church. Again, when we all go home the Holy Spirit is not left behind pushing a dust mop around the balcony while we sleep. The building is not the church. The clergy are not the church. The Diocesan office is not the church. You are the church! We are the church.

III. Promise of Jesus That Church Would Prevail

Now, I am pushing you to consider this alternative definition of *church* because definitions have consequences. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus promised Peter, "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Now is Jesus promising that if an earthquake comes, this building would be spared? No, Jesus makes no claim as about buildings. What Jesus promises is that come hell or high water, there will always be a body assembled in His name and empowered by His Holy Spirit. This body, this organism, the church will not be destroyed. So inasmuch as we are truly the church of Jesus Christ, Beloved, our future is bright. But inasmuch as we are something else: club, a self-serving body, a self-centered body, a body that holds us as an idol anything that is not the Holy Trinity of God. Our future is questionable, if not downright dim.

IV. The Holograph Analogy

There is a certain type of holographic film that if you shine a laser on it, it will produce a three dimensional image. Now the funny thing about this particular type of hologram is that if you cut the film in half say. You have a picture of a rose. You don't get half a rose; you get a diminished picture of the entire rose. It is less detailed, it is less defined, but it is still a rose. If you continue to cut the film in half, at some point, you will no longer be able to recognize the image as a rose. That's what the church is like: insomuch as we join together, by the power of the Holy Spirit, in worship and common purpose, the church is strengthened. And insomuch as we stay home or hoard our gifts as our own, or expect someone else to do what needs to be done, the church is diminished. Indeed, the church is diminished right now because there is a world of unchurched persons right outside our door.

V. Taking Part in That Promise

Beloved, I want us to take part in the promise that Jesus made to Peter to be the church against which the gates of Hell shall not prevail because I believe in this place. I believe that the Cathedral has a potentially powerful and significant future. I want us to be the church of Jesus Christ so that when persons out there come to their senses, when circumstances drive them through our door, what they will find here is the only earthly refuge that can fend off the storms of life, the Church of Jesus Christ empowered and guided by His Holy Spirit. When that little old lady in Baltimore sings, "Happy Birthday, Dear Church," whether it be here on earth or up in heaven, I want her to be singing about us!

All of these things will only be possible when we, by the grace of God, set aside our own desires and aspirations and misconceptions and take up instead the true work and life of the church. Then and only then, can we be the body that God would have us to be: a body attuned, not to our needs, but a body focused on God and attuned to the needs of His wayward and lost—both out there and in here. A body that prayerfully asks itself, "what can we do and be so that we are not the church diminished, but the church empowered by the Holy Spirit?"

Beloved, I extend to you a call to prayer. a call to prayerfully consider this radical definition of *church*. A call to prayerfully consider what this re-orientation might mean for you as a child of God. A call to pray for the presence of the Holy Spirit—that we might be His church assembled and empowered against which the gates of hell shall not prevail.

Dear Lord, let it be so.

"Happy Birthday, Dear Church"