

Today

May/June 2018

refresh, refocus, renew

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

ALSO: PHILIPPIANS: THE MIND OF CHRIST

Friends:

What is the church? Is it a club, like a book club or a ball team that you might join for a while, as you wish? Or is it a volunteer organization like a food pantry or a social-service program dedicated to helping people? What's the difference between a local church and a neighborhood association with potlucks and clothing drives? What does it mean to be a people called out and gathered, filled, equipped, and driven by the Holy Spirit?



If the church is directed and run the Holy Spirit, then it is much more than a fan club for Jesus. If we are called and joined to Christ's body by God himself, then there is no other gathering like the church, and Christians will live intently in relationship with one another and with God.

This May, Jul Medenblik explores some of these questions about the nature of the church as designed by God, looking especially through the lenses of Ascension Day and Pentecost, which we celebrate this month.

Then in June, Scott Hoezee digs deep into the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In many ways, Philippians examines the life of the church through one particular congregation as they are challenged to adopt the mind of Christ in their everyday living.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Steven Koster". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Steven" and the last name "Koster" clearly distinguishable.

—Steven Koster

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**"Philippians:
The Mind of Christ"**
Scott Hoezee

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

may

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

Jul Medenblik

In *Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony* we read, “The Spirit gathers people from every tongue, tribe, and nation into the unity of the body of Christ. Anointed and sent by the Spirit, the church is thrust into the world, ambassadors of God’s peace, announcing forgiveness and reconciliation, proclaiming the good news of grace” (paragraph 30).

In the month of May, through the illuminating lenses of Ascension Day and Pentecost and a number of Scriptures pointing out these events, let’s explore how the church has existed from the beginning of the world as God has been at work to build his people.

To further highlight these passages, the *Belgic Confession* of the Christian church notes, “We believe and confess one single catholic or universal church—a holy congregation and gathering of true Christian believers, awaiting their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by his blood, and sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit. This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will last until the end” (Article 27).

Rev. Jul Medenblik is a former attorney who was called to pastoral ministry and became the founding pastor of a church in New Lenox, Illinois. He is currently serving as president of Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Jul and his wife, Jackie, are blessed with a son, Joshua, and a daughter, Julianne.

LINKING US TOGETHER

God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. . . ."
—Genesis 1:26

Where do we begin the story of the church? Bible teachers have wrestled with that question for centuries. Volumes have been written in attempts to provide an answer.

This month Christians will commemorate Ascension Day and Pentecost as key dates in the development of the early church. In some ways, we can look at those events as "beginning" dates of the church, but then we would miss some of the other beginnings that help us understand the ministry of Jesus as well as those special days.

I believe we can best understand the church by remembering God's original design. From the beginning of creation, God was linking himself to us and our world. God was making room for us. He was preparing in all his creativity a setting by which people, made in his im-

age, could work, play, worship, and rest in his presence.

When we know God's original design for this world, we have a deeper understanding that the church is part of his renewal of all things by developing a community in which God wants to show what real love looks like.

Though all of us human beings "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), we have been made in his image for God's purposes, and he will never let us go.

Dear God, may we be encouraged to remember that we and all other persons are so precious to you that you sent your Son to save us. Keep us close, we pray, by the power of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

LEAVING AND BLESSING

"Go from your country, your people and your father's household. . . . And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

—Genesis 12:1-3

As a child and now as a parent, I have been a part of moments of leaving. Tears are sometimes shed. Hugs are shared.

We are not sure what kind of leaving Abram and his wife, Sarai, and their nephew Lot experienced, but we do know that God called them on a journey with him.

God was on the move to redeem his world and to restore people to himself—and we can see that in the promises of blessing that he gave to Abram in Genesis 12.

God works through people, and as he makes us his people—his family, his church—God seeks to mold us as a people of blessing. God promised Abram and his descendants abundant blessings, but those were never meant to be just for them. They were called out

as a family to become a blessing to all families.

When we think of leaving and blessing, we can also think of Jesus' leaving from heaven to come and live with us. He came to bring us grace and eternal life, but these gifts became available because Jesus was willing to leave heaven for our sake.

Maybe you are in a season of leaving. If so, may God give you strength for the journey. And wherever you are, may you know that God wants to bless people through you.

Dear Lord, prepare the way for our walking and working with you. When we are tired and discouraged, may we know that you are with us and blessing us to be a blessing to others. Amen.

HOUSE OF GOD, GATE OF HEAVEN

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought . . . "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."
—Genesis 28:16-17

In today's verses, Jacob is on the run, but he is under the watchful eye of God.

As Jacob enters into sleep using a stone for a pillow, he receives a vision. He sees an ongoing connection between heaven and earth, "a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven." And he sees angels not just ascending into heaven but also descending to the earth, where they serve God among his people (Psalm 91:11). Jacob called the place Bethel, which means "house of God."

The church of my growing-up years in Fulton, Illinois, was called Bethel. It was situated on a hill near the Mississippi River. Growing up, I did not see that church as being "awesome" or the "gate of heaven," but now, looking back, I see something that I did not see then.

I see more clearly than ever that my faith was molded within that community. Along with memories of my parents, I remember a youth counselor named Siebert, a pastor named Case, and a friend named Todd who was always there for me.

When we meet Jacob in Genesis 28, he is alone. He is not sure when, if ever, he can return home again. And yet God reminds him that he is not really alone. There is a connection between heaven and earth. Today, we might even call that connection . . . a church.

Dear God of heaven and earth, may "your kingdom come . . . on earth as it is in heaven." May we open our eyes to see how your church can be a witness by connecting people to you. In Jesus, Amen.

GOD'S PURPOSE: SAVING MANY LIVES

"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

—Genesis 50:20

Our journey to understand God's purposes for the church takes us back to some key moments in salvation history.

The church is the carrier of the story of God and how God is creating a new people to make up a community of grace. There are twists and turns in the story, as we can see in the life of Joseph, for example. A favored son gets sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. When it seems like things might get better for Joseph, something else happens and he lands in prison with no hope of release. Then God gives Joseph the ability to interpret dreams to bring about not only his release but also the saving of his family and many others from famine. (See Genesis 37-49.)

Genesis 50 brings us to the moment when Joseph's father, Jacob, has died, and the

brothers of Joseph worry that he might punish them. What will Joseph do now as payback for all the wrong they had done to him?

Joseph looks beyond their actions to the ultimate purpose of God. God desires to save people. God desires to use people like Joseph—and us—to bring about a new day and provide new life for his people.

In this story we see a picture of how God is at work in the twists and turns of life—and he is still at work in our lives today!

God of grace and forgiveness, help us to look beyond our hurts and troubles to see that you are at work in our lives too—day in and day out. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

CHURCH: A NEW FAMILY

"Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God."

—Ruth 1:16

In our story for today, Ruth, who married into Naomi's family, pledges to remain with Naomi and to join with her people and worship God. At the end of the book of Ruth, we find Naomi with a grandchild, born to Ruth and a kinsman-redeemer named Boaz, who has married the widow Ruth and taken her mother-in-law Naomi into his household (Ruth 4). Hope is restored to this family through God's provision of extended family members who show his love to one another.

I experienced something like that in a church full of transplants. People from many places became a large extended family to one another. I especially remember a woman named Carol who had no grandchildren but became a grandmother to my own children.

One purpose of the church is to reshape our understanding of family. Being part of a church family means including people who are not related by blood—except for the blood of Jesus.

The early church quickly became a community in which people relied on one another and even called each other brothers and sisters.

One of the ongoing challenges of being a church family is to understand that our relationships are to be shaped by our relationship with God. God is making us into a family.

Father God, help us, your children, to have church families in which we love each other as brothers and sisters in faith. Forgive us when we do not act that way. In the name of our Brother, Jesus, Amen.

A GLIMPSE OF ASCENSION DAY

The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." —Psalm 110:1

This coming Thursday will mark Ascension Day on the calendar of the church. Forty days after Easter Sunday, Jesus ascended into heaven, leaving his disciples to do the work of his church on earth. In today's psalm reading, we have a glimpse of that day from King David, who wrote this psalm.

Jesus is in the genealogy line of King David. About 1,000 years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem (David's hometown), David gave thanks and praise to God as he wrote this psalm.

Jesus links himself to this psalm in the gospel of Matthew. He asks the religious leaders and teachers, "Whose son is the Christ (or, Messiah)?" They all answer that the Christ is the Son of David. Jesus then asks how that son can be called a lord over King David. To back up his point, Jesus quotes

Psalm 110:1, which they know is a prophecy of the Messiah, who would one day sit at God's right hand. The teachers are silent. They don't know how to answer. (See Matthew 22:41-46.)

The answer is in the fact that Jesus has always been with God the Father. He has always been the Son of God, even before he became the Son of David. As Colossians 1:17 puts it, "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

Isn't it amazing and humbling that the triune God was working out this story from the beginning of time?

God of time and eternity, thank you for your faithfulness to us day after day. May we rejoice that Jesus is the Lord of life, now and forever. Amen.

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

The LORD said to [Moses] . . . "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you will not cross over into it." —Deuteronomy 34:4

Moses has led the people of God for more than forty years after leading them out of slavery in Egypt, but this is the end of the journey for him. From the time when God spoke to him out of a burning bush (Exodus 3) until this day, Moses has walked closely with God.

Along the way, there have been twists and turns. On one occasion, Moses' anger took over, and his actions led to the consequence of his not being allowed to go into the promised land (Numbers 20:6-13.)

Still, God graces Moses with a view of what is to come. Moses sees the land and knows again that God will keep his promises. The land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will become a gift to their descendants.

Promise and fulfillment are key teachings that the church, as the people of God, still carry

to this world today. We live in hope, knowing that Christ, who already fulfilled so many of God's promises to his people, will come again and fulfill all of God's promises completely in the new heaven and new earth, where he is now preparing a place for us (John 14:1-3; Revelation 21-22).

In that new reality we will be able to live with him in God's presence forever, thanks to all that Christ has accomplished for us. He is able to lead all who love and serve him into the full life and well-being that God has promised since the beginning.

Dear God, thank you for being the God of promise and fulfillment. Help us to look to Jesus, who is not only the author but also the finisher of our faith. In his name, Amen.

TAKEN UP TO HEAVEN

The company of the prophets from Jericho, who were watching, said, "The spirit of Elijah is resting on Elisha." —2 Kings 2:15

In our journey to understand Ascension Day, we need to stop and overhear this exchange between the prophet Elijah and his successor, Elisha. Three times Elijah notes that he is on a journey.

The first stop is Bethel, where Jacob had his dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth and angels ascending and descending on it (Genesis 28:10-22). The second stop is Jericho, remembered as the first place of battle when the people of God entered the promised land (Joshua 5:13-6:27). The third stop is the Jordan River, which the people crossed on dry ground to enter the promised land (Joshua 3:1-17); this was also where John the Baptist would baptize people, including Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17).

At each stop Elijah says, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me."

And Elisha responds, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you."

The journey ends, though, when chariots and horses of fire separate Elisha from his master and Elijah goes up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha not only sees this happen, but he also takes up the cloak of Elijah, which God allows him to use in parting the waters of the Jordan River again on his way back to Jericho. Just as Joshua was appointed to follow Moses, it's clear that Elisha was appointed to follow Elijah. The mission of God continues.

God of power and might, may your mission continue, and may we be strengthened and equipped to do our part by the power of your Spirit. Amen.

THE TRANSFIGURATION OF JESUS

There appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus.
—Mark 9:4

I remember well the summer of 1977 when my father prepared for heart surgery. Medical tests were completed. Plans were made on how the family farm would work during his absence and recovery. But another type of preparation was also under way. I remember a person visiting who had recovered from open-heart surgery. That person testified to what the experience was like, and that encouraged my dad and our family.

In our Bible reading today, we see that Jesus receives some unusual visitors in the dazzling brightness of heaven. We don't know what they talk about, but this visit with Moses, Elijah, and God the Father is surely an encouragement to Jesus on his mission. Both Moses and Elijah met with God on a mountain at different times many years earlier, and they were encour-

aged in their work (see Exodus 33 and 1 Kings 19).

Peter, James, and John are eyewitnesses to this meeting, and they are frightened. They can even *see* Moses and Elijah. Peter, not knowing what to say or do, suggests building some shelters, but then God speaks to them urgently: "This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!"

Jesus has already told his disciples that he will be killed and then rise again (Mark 8:31). And God is urging them to prepare for this change that is coming for Jesus—and ultimately for them and us. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus change everything. Are we listening too?

God of heaven and earth,
may we be encouraged by
all that Jesus has done to
provide us full life. Amen.

“WHY YOU LEAVE ME?”

He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.
—Acts 1:9

I am old enough to remember when you could walk with people right up to the departure gates at an airport. Before the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001, you could see your loved ones board a plane and watch their flight depart. But even if you don't have that memory, we all know what it is to have to part with someone we love.

My daughter has a question that she still uses when I am headed out the door. She looks at me and says, “Why you leave me?” Her words echo the phrasing she used as a young child. Then I usually tell her I am leaving for work and will return soon.

In a way like children, the disciples who were gathered around Jesus were focused on what mattered to them. “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” Their view was limited to what Jesus would do for their little corner

of the world. What Jesus was about to do was so much more!

Jesus gave them a promise (power from the Holy Spirit), a mission (to be his witnesses), and a vision (from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth). The disciples were on the edge of a new chapter in the ongoing story of God and his people.

By ascending, Jesus has gone to work in heaven for us, and he has given us a task that is both life-challenging and life-giving. In addition, Jesus has promised to be with us always, by his Spirit. He will never leave us!

Dear God, as we remember Ascension Day and Jesus' return to heaven, may we be encouraged to know that as he works to spread his church everywhere, he is also with us. Amen.

INSTRUCTIONS AND PROMISES

"Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

—Matthew 28:20

When my parents left on a vacation and put me in charge of the family farm, they wrote out instructions for me to follow.

After Jesus ascended to heaven, the disciples gathered together and prayed (Acts 1:14). They also kept in mind all the teachings and instructions Jesus had given them. It's clear from the New Testament gospel accounts, written down some years later, that Jesus' followers in the early church remembered their identity and mission. They were disciples of Jesus, and they were to go and make disciples of Jesus from all nations.

As the disciples began this next chapter as the people of God, they also knew they were not alone. They remembered Jesus' "last words" telling them that all authority in heaven and earth had been given to him. They also heard a promise: "I am with you always." But

if Jesus was in heaven, how could he also be with them—and today with us?

When the believers received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2), that would help to answer some of their questions, but they had to continue in faith, with other questions unanswered. Some even doubted.

Today we may also have doubts from time to time. That doesn't mean we are no longer believers, and it certainly doesn't mean Jesus isn't keeping his promise to be with us always! But in faith, and with his Spirit living in our hearts, we can follow his instructions and trust his promises.

Dear God, we need you to help us face our fears and doubts. May the presence of Christ by his Spirit empower us! Amen.

THE HANDS OF JESUS

While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.
—Luke 24:51

Between Easter Sunday and Ascension Day, there are forty days. We only have glimpses of what Jesus did during that period, but our reading for today includes two of those glimpses—one taking place on Easter Sunday, and the other on Ascension Day.

Jesus' Easter appearance to his disciples shocks them. They are startled and frightened. They have fears and doubts. In response, Jesus encourages his disciples to look at his hands. He even uses his hands to take some fish and eat it, showing them he is real, having flesh and bones.

The crucified hands of Jesus have inspired artists and poets for 2,000 years. And these same hands are later raised over the disciples in blessing as Jesus parts with them. Luke records that after Jesus is taken up to heaven, the disciples

worship him and return to Jerusalem "with great joy."

Sometimes our understanding of the work of Jesus and our response can come across as mechanical or even pompous. It should never be. A key remedy is to focus on the hands of Jesus. His hands were pierced for you and me. And they still reach out to us, in all our need each day, and bless us.

Dear Jesus, may your pierced hands still lead us, challenge us, comfort us, protect us, and bless us. Thank you for your love, which you so clearly showed when you opened your hands to receive nails meant for us. Amen.

RELATED BY FAITH

Jesus . . . said to her, "Woman, here is your son," and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home.
—John 19:26-27

In many countries at some time of the year there is a focus of gratitude and celebration for the life and influence of mothers. Today is such a day in the United States and Canada as we celebrate Mothers Day.

On this day we generally celebrate the mothers who gave us birth, or adopted us, or stood in a mother's place for us (such as an aunt or grandmother). We give thanks for and rightly honor the people who have cared for us and loved us.

In God's family the basis of our relationships is love and care as well. Being part of God's family is about recognizing the love and provisions we receive from God, coming to faith by God's grace, and then connecting with others who have a similar relationship with God—and inviting still others whom

God wants us to welcome into his family.

As we learn about how the early church developed, we see that the mother of Jesus became part of the household of the disciple John. She also became a "mother" to John and took care of him. Jesus made sure that this relationship of mutual adoption framed their future even as he paid the ultimate price for all our sin.

Let's not forget about this important link between Mary and John. The early church was noted for their love for one another in Christ. May we follow that example today too and live out that legacy.

Father God, in your family help us to live by love, hospitality, and generosity for Jesus' sake. Amen.

THE FOUNDATION OF PRAYER

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.

—Acts 1:14

Jesus has ascended to heaven, and a waiting period for his followers has begun. On the day he ascended, Jesus said, “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised” (Acts 1:4). They would have remembered that this gift would be the power and presence of God’s Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), but Jesus didn’t say when the Spirit would come. So, what were they to do while waiting?

A lot of action transpires in the book of Acts, but one of the first recorded actions of these believers after Jesus’ ascension is that they join together in prayer. We are not sure how all this is organized or what the form of their prayers is, but we do know three things.

First, they join together. This group that scattered and fled from the Mount of Olives when Jesus was arrested are

together again as they now walk back to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.

Second, they are constantly in prayer. There is an everyday consistency that marks their life before God and one another.

Third, even the brothers of Jesus who did not join in following him as disciples now join with this group of believers.

God is preparing his people, and he does this through prayer.

Dear God, so often our prayers are about our needs and wants. Please forgive us for our self-centeredness even in prayer. May we join together in prayer for the needs of others and for your church, seeking your will. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES

"The Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus."

—Acts 1:16

How do we understand the actions of Judas, who betrayed Jesus? In many ways, our answer needs to be that we simply do not know. God is the only one who sees the human heart.

As the believers gather for prayer, Peter is prompted to speak. He places the story of Judas within the context of Scripture. Peter puts history under the arc of promise and fulfillment and even places what seems so contrary to God's plan as an event that is still within God's ultimate purposes.

I don't know how you think about not only Judas's life but also your own life. Each of us has chapters of our lives that we wish were different. We all have regrets for some of the things we have done, and we may still live under clouds of disappointment. We may even find it ironic that Peter, who denied Jesus

three times, just as the Lord had predicted, is the one who now stands and speaks. But maybe it has to be Peter.

Peter is the one who denied his Lord even though he swore that would never happen. We can see a picture of grace here as we watch Peter stand and state that this chapter of the believers' life together with Jesus was not outside the plan of God. We may not understand it. We may even still question it, but we can also have the hope that God has a plan for each of us.

Lord of all, we are people with regrets, doubts, and disappointments. We pray for your forgiveness and grace. Thank you for providing new chapters of life for us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

THE BLESSING OF WITNESSES

"One of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."
—Acts 1:22

As a former attorney, I dealt a lot with witnesses. I worked in the area of insurance defense, and slips and falls and car accidents were the focus of most of my cases. I learned that observant witnesses can be really hard to find. Inattention leads to many accidents, and that is also a feature of the way many people live their lives.

As Peter explains that the believers need to identify one person to replace Judas, he makes clear that the key qualification for becoming one of the twelve apostles is that one needs to have been with Jesus and the disciples throughout Jesus' ministry on earth. This person has to be a reliable witness.

What good is adding another witness? Bible scholars agree that a parallel is being carried forward—from the twelve tribes of Israel to the twelve apostles, who will take the

good news of Jesus to the whole world. Adding Matthias will restore the number of apostles to twelve.

Further, the apostles understand that good witnesses are needed to tell others about Jesus. Witnesses are needed to bring a message about the reality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection to fulfill the mission that Jesus has given them.

Witnesses are still needed today as well. We may not be able to give a first-hand account like Matthias, but we are still called to be witnesses for Jesus.

Dear God, may our witness for Jesus be clear. Grant us courage in being faithful witnesses as we give testimony about the Savior as the Lord of our lives. In his name, Amen.

FIRE AND CALLING

The angel of the LORD appeared to [Moses] in flames of fire from within a bush.
—Exodus 3:2

As Ascension Day and (soon) Pentecost Sunday focus the attention of the church calendar this month, we can make connections from these events to other Bible passages.

God has always been at work in developing and redeeming a people. From the story of Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 50), we see how God protected a fractured family—Israel—and provided food for them in the midst of a famine. But after several generations, the tables turned, and the people of Israel became slaves to the Egyptians. God heard the cries of his people, however, and would lead them out to the promised land.

The unlikely leader for this mission was a murderer, Moses. He killed an Egyptian to protect someone from getting a beating and then ran away (Exodus 2:12-15). Then,

some years later, out in the wilderness, Moses received God's call by way of a bush that was on fire but did not burn up. As Moses drew closer to this holy ground, God declared that he had heard the cries of his people and wanted Moses to bring them out of slavery. Fire and calling.

As Moses was called into God's service through holy fire, that event anticipated the day when the Holy Spirit of God would be poured out, in tongues like fire (Acts 2:3), on all who would be messengers of hope and love to a world crying out in despair and anger.

Dear God, you call us to be your people and tell others about your mighty acts. May we also find comfort in knowing that we can trust your promises to be with us. Amen.

FIRE AND A CALL FOR DECISION

When all the people saw [the fire of the LORD], they fell prostrate and cried, "The LORD—he is God! The LORD—he is God!"

—2 Kings 18:39

Fire can be destructive, but it can also illuminate. The prophet Elijah on Mount Carmel stands as God's representative before people who worship other gods and people from Israel who can't seem to choose. Elijah calls them to decide between the Lord, the one true God, and Baal, the false god.

Before any decision is made, a contest is played out between Elijah and the prophets of Baal as to who can bring fire from heaven down on a sacrifice. The prophets of Baal prepare their sacrifice and cry out for Baal's attention, going so far as to cut themselves and bleed. But there is no response, because Baal does not exist.

Then Elijah pours water over the sacrifice he has prepared. The sacrifice is totally drenched, and water also fills a trench around the altar. Then Elijah

prays to God. In response, the Lord sends fire so intense that it burns up the sacrifice and the wood, stones, and soil and evaporates the water in the trench. In this battle, it is clear who has won. The people no longer waver. They cry out and acknowledge the Lord as God.

We serve the one true God, who hears us. We serve the God who is not silent. We serve the God who was even willing to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for us, securing our salvation. This God also turns to us and calls us to follow him.

Dear God, forgive us when we waver or even flirt with other gods like the god of self, or power, or status, or materialism. May we cry out and acknowledge you day by day. Amen.

THE SPIRIT WILL POUR OUT

"I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions."
—Joel 2:28

On this Saturday in May, many colleges and seminaries will hold graduation ceremonies. Congratulations to our graduates! As a seminary president who stands before men and women who have completed their education and are ready to commence or continue on their ministry journey, I will be reminded of this passage in the book of Joel.

On Pentecost Sunday, this is the passage the apostle Peter referred to when he explained the good news of Jesus. There are many Scriptures to choose from, but if you had to address people who were skeptical, fearful, and even amazed, which passage would you choose?

Peter drew from the prophet Joel, who speaks about the outpouring of the Spirit on all people. This prophecy and its

message are not for a select few, or even a single nation, but for everyone.

In a moment in time, God pours out his Spirit and inaugurates a new day for his relationship with his people. Prophecies, visions, and dreams that were once reserved for a select few are now distributed through young and old, men and women. A new day has come, and it has one ultimate purpose: the skeptical, the fearful, and the amazed are invited to call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

Lord, bless all our graduates who commence to a new stage of life. May your Spirit be poured out on them, and may they serve you well wherever they are called. In Jesus, Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AT WORK

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. —Acts 2:4

Ten days have passed since Jesus ascended to heaven and instructed his disciples to stay in Jerusalem. The day of Pentecost has now arrived. Pentecost is not just something found in the New Testament, it is actually an Old Testament holiday tied with the Feast of Harvest, or the Feast of Weeks, noting the beginning of harvesttime.

This is also a time when religious pilgrims would travel to Jerusalem from faraway lands. So “God-fearing Jews from every nation” are present for this event.

A blowing, violent wind is followed by what appears to be tongues of fire separating and resting on the disciples. People from many nations gather to see what is going on. And something bewildering and wonderful occurs. Everyone can understand what is being said!

The words of the disciples find their mark because those who are listening can hear the message in their own language. The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), where God confused the people’s language, is reversed by the Holy Spirit so that people can understand one another. And throughout the crowd, people are wondering, “What does this mean?”

A harvest of souls is being gathered. This is an example of what Jesus meant when he taught his disciples: “Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for the harvest” (John 4:35).

Lord of the harvest, thank you for sending your Spirit to empower us to be your witnesses in word and deed. May our words be guided and even translated by your Spirit. Amen.

WHAT SHALL WE DO?

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said . . . "What shall we do?"
—Acts 2:37

As Peter stands before the crowd, the Holy Spirit guides his words. Jesus promised this guidance when he said, "I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15), and, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13).

Peter's message is therefore rooted in the promises of God and the fulfillment of those promises in Christ. He recalls the words of the prophet Joel, which contain not only the promise of God's Spirit poured out on all people, but also an invitation to call on the name of the Lord and be saved.

Who is this Lord? It is Jesus, whom the people crucified.

By weaving back and forth from the promises of God and the life of Jesus, Peter builds his case to this key point: "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." And the people ask, "What shall we do?"

Peter then guides these listeners to "repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ." And they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pressing further, he urges and pleads with others to call on the Lord's name. And about 3,000 people believe and are baptized!

Dear God, may our hearts always be open to your gospel message. Our sins brought Jesus to the cross, and he paid the price to save us from eternal death. Thank you for the grace that comes through salvation in Jesus. Amen.

DEVOTION DISPLAYED

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. —Acts 2:42

Our passage for today has been used in countless settings not only to encourage but also to warn. The warning sinks in when we recognize the distance between this picture of the early church and some of our own church practices today. The encouragement comes when we understand that the church is still alive, thanks to the Holy Spirit. There are principles to be noted, explored, and followed.

The key element we see in this picture of the church is devotion. We see devotion toward God and toward building community, in following Jesus' teaching and in calling on the Lord in prayer. This devotion is seen; it is visible. In the Old Testament, God called his people together to display his blessing and care to the nations (Genesis 12:3; 28:14). This continues in the New Testament.

Then and now, the church is to display God's love and grace to a world that wonders who God is and what God is about. In Acts 2 we see a church that has open hands, hearts, and homes for others. Their praise to God and enjoyment of one another is contagious and attractive.

I imagine it was also messy. Can you imagine going from 120 people in fellowship to more than 3,000 in one day? And then growing more and more as time went on? In the midst of the mess of being together, God keeps building his church—one life at a time.

Dear God, thank you for every person we can connect with today. May we show them a joyful devotion directed to you and displayed to all we meet. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WHAT WE HAVE WE GIVE

"Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." —Acts 3:1-10

In today's story we see the apostles Peter and John going together to the temple to pray. This picture of devotion and community is contrasted with that of a beggar "being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful" and left to beg for his daily bread from the people going into the temple courts.

At busy intersections in cities today, we can sometimes see people holding signs asking for food or money. Though we may wonder if they are truthful about their situation, we all know what happens when we come across them. We usually avoid making eye contact. We avoid seeing them.

But the apostles did not avoid making eye contact. Our passage says that Peter looked straight at the man who was lame and even asked him to look at him and John. Expect-

ing some coins of silver or gold, the man looked up.

Peter's next words would have been discouraging to a person begging: "Silver or gold I do not have. . . ." But then came words of healing "in the name of Jesus Christ," and, beyond his wildest dreams, the man was able to walk and jump for joy. So he followed along with the apostles, praising God in the temple courts. Now that is Beautiful!

Dear God of healing, help us to see people in need. May our eyes be directed by your heart for others. May we be people who welcome and show your love to everyone. In Jesus' name, Amen.

AS YOU CAN SEE

"By faith in the name of Jesus, this man . . . was made strong. It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has completely healed him, as you can all see." —Acts 3:16

When Peter healed the lame man who had been begging, people noticed and stopped what they were doing so that they could see what was going on. And why not? They recognized him as the man who was lame from birth and who had always lain on a mat, begging, but now he was "jumping, and praising God"! (See Acts 3:1-10.)

When a crowd gathers in amazement for a healing like that, Peter knows what to do. He knows that the healing of one person can lead to the repentance and healing of many others, so he steps up to preach.

In words that parallel his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-39), Peter urges his listeners to repent of their sin and believe in Jesus Christ. The crowd may be amazed by what happened to one lame person, but Peter

sees a greater purpose. This healing is not meant to bring praise for the lame person or the apostles. It is to lead people to look beyond the healed person to Jesus Christ, in whose name the healing has occurred.

We often see and meet people who do things for others in order to draw attention to themselves. But if we really want to live as the body of Christ, we need to help people come to know Jesus.

Dear God, may we repent of focusing on anything that does not help us see Jesus in our lives, the lives of others, and the world around us all. Thank you for your forgiveness, healing, and love. Amen.

“BEEN WITH JESUS”

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.—Acts 4:13

After a night in jail, Peter and John are brought before the religious rulers and teachers of the law. The apostles' teaching to the crowds has led to more people coming to faith in Jesus. But now Peter and John are standing before the religious leaders who oppose Jesus.

These religious leaders thought they were done with Jesus when they managed to get him crucified. Now they want to do what they can to silence Peter and John, so they threaten them. But they also know that a great healing has taken place. Everyone who goes to the temple knows the man who was lame—and now he is healed. How can this be?

The religious leaders do not believe the healing of the lame man is linked to Jesus, but they do link the courage of Peter and John to Jesus. The rulers

see Peter and John as ordinary, unschooled people. They are fishermen. Peter and John are used to the Sea of Galilee, not the Sanhedrin council of rulers.

What does it mean that the rulers took note that Peter and John “had been with Jesus”? What did that have to do with their courage? The apostles now knew that everything Jesus had said and promised was true. And they trusted that Jesus, by his Spirit, was still with them. So in everything they were doing it was clear that Peter, John, and the community of believers in Christ were people who were “with Jesus.”

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: lead us, protect us, and empower us so that we are faithful witnesses of being with you! Amen.

ENABLING PRAYER

"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."
—Acts 4:29

With the threats of the religious rulers lingering over them, Peter and John return to their church family and report what has happened. And in response to these threats, the community of believers prays together to God.

I am always struck by what they did not pray. They did not ask God to bring destruction on the religious leaders. They did not ask God to take them out of their time of trouble. Instead, they prayed that God would consider the threats against them and enable them to speak with boldness. That prayer was specifically answered as the Holy Spirit filled them and the place they were in was shaken.

How could the believers come to pray such a prayer? The prayer itself gives us the insight that they looked not just to the moment but also surveyed the

history of God's people. They knew the promises and prophecies of God. They placed their current situation within the setting of Scripture. For us, that would be like having the Bible's teachings in mind as we sift through the daily news.

What's more, at the beginning of their prayer, the believers put all their troubles and threats in perspective under the umbrella of God's sovereignty. They knew that God was still in control. What they prayed was that they would be able to keep being witnesses to the Sovereign Lord, who was still at work in the world he so loved.

Dear God, in a world full of turbulence and trouble, give us the hope and trust that you are still at work. May we join you in that work with boldness and joy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

“NO NEEDY PERSONS AMONG THEM”

God's grace was so powerfully at work in them all that there were no needy persons among them. —Acts 4:33-34

Churches can have a certain reputation based on their history, their music, and the ministries they sponsor. The church in our passage for today has a reputation. They are a “needs-meeting church.”

People's needs were being met because the church had a unified heart, mind, and testimony—all based in the love of Christ. They had a story to tell—that Jesus Christ came to live and die for us and rose from the dead. But they knew they also had to show what this good-news message meant in their lives with one another.

Rev. Scott Hoezee, director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary, has written a book called *Actuality: Real Life Stories for Sermons That Matter*, and it includes a chapter devoted to the topic “Show, Don't Just Tell.”

Maybe, as a child, you had times in school for “show and tell.” Students would take turns bringing a favorite toy or pet and talking about it to the class. As we grow older, we can tend more toward “telling” and forget the joy and the power of “showing.”

Our passage for today ends with a “show” story of a person who sells land and gives the money to the church to help meet the needs of others. His generosity and encouragement to others even lead the apostles to call him Barnabas, meaning “son of encouragement.” May we join with Barnabas and be “show and tell” people of the gospel!

Lord, thank you for always meeting our needs. May your grace and love inspire us to “show and tell” the good news of Jesus. Amen.

TROUBLE IN THE CHURCH

Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" —Acts 5:3

Land was sold. The money from the sale was brought to the church. People celebrated: "Thank you, Barnabas! What an encouragement you are!"

Then Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, crafted a plan. They would also sell some land. Prompted by the whispers of Satan, they planned to bring *some* of the proceeds to the apostles and then declare before God and his people that they gave *all* of the money to the church.

Why would they make up such a lie? Did they want the same acclaim that was given to Barnabas? Did jealousy entangle their hearts? Did greed convince them that they should keep some of the money for themselves?

At the end of this story there are two dead bodies and a fearful church. Though everything

seemed to be going well, the church includes people who still struggle with sins, such as jealousy and greed—and so much more. What we all need are hearts open to grace from God.

As Peter confronted the couple, I am sure he did it with great sadness. He knew what it was like to let God down and to disappoint Jesus (Luke 22:54-62).

We don't have to have a heart filled with Satan's whispers. There is another way.

Dear God, we are more like Ananias and Sapphira than we care to admit. Help us to open our hearts to you in confession so that we may live fully by your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

ALL IS NOT LOST

The apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people.
—Acts 5:12

As Luke tells the story of the mighty acts of God in and through his church, he wants to make sure that we understand the ongoing work and ministry of God's people. The story of Ananias and Sapphira has led to death and fear, but it is not the end of the story, and all is not lost.

The ministry of Jesus through his body, the church, goes on. One way that Luke highlights this continuing work is in the ministry of healing. Just as Jesus was known as a healer, the apostles became known for their work in healing. And many people who were sick and tormented by spirits were healed.

While we may not be living in a time when an apostle's very shadow brings healing, we do live in a time when we are still called to bring people who are ill and troubled before the church for prayer—and, spe-

cifically, prayer for healing. The apostles did not heal. They were agents of healing by the power and in the name of Jesus.

Notice that while many people brought their loved ones to the apostles for healing, there is a note that some people did not dare join the believers who met together in Solomon's Colonnade. May we not be people who do not dare to join, but may we instead be drawn even deeper to the church that continues to proclaim the message and ministry of healing in the name of Christ, our Savior.

Dear God of healing, today we remember not just ourselves but also the people we know who are in need. May we be your agents of prayer and healing. In Jesus' name, Amen.

“IF IT IS FROM GOD”

“But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” —Acts 5:39

The church faced trouble from within and without. As it grew in numbers and in ministry, there was jealousy from the religious rulers and teachers. It was hard to ignore what was happening, especially when the apostles were jailed one day and then they were found outside prison the next day, telling more people about new life in Jesus.

The guards checked all the doors and locks. They had no idea how the prisoners escaped. But the apostles knew they were released by an angel of the Lord and told to share the story of Jesus in the temple courts.

At the news that the apostles were still pointing people to Jesus, the religious leaders did not pause to reflect on the wonder of this release from prison. They did not want to understand what was happening. Instead, they were furious

and wanted to kill the followers of Jesus.

Then a well-respected leader named Gamaliel stood up and spoke some words of caution and wisdom. There had been other groups that attracted a following, but over time, none of them amounted to anything. Gamaliel could see that if this new movement had no real foundation, it would fail. But if it came from God, there was no point in trying to fight God.

Gamaliel's argument has prevailed. Today, 2,000 years later, it's clear that the church is from God!

Dear God, we pray for the church everywhere. Dear Jesus, continue to build your church, day after day, and may we find our part in its story. In your name, Amen.

A NEW ERA BEGINS

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. . . .
—Acts 6:7

The unity of the church can be threatened in many ways—even over the distribution of food. The church was growing as a “needs-meeting” community of faith. And that growth brought challenges, including the challenge of “overlooking.”

If we enter a room full of people, we usually look first for people we know. As a result, we can overlook others.

The followers of Jesus knew the Hebraic widows. They were the ones connected with families that they knew, or knew of. But the widows who came from Greek-speaking Jewish families were relatively unknown. So in the daily distribution of food, many of them went unnoticed—and unfed.

As tensions rose, the potential for church division along ethnic lines grew. So the apostles called everyone together to

address this need. The apostles would remain focused on prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. Seven others would serve the needy, and it's clear from the names of these seven leaders that they were from a Greek background. So the church's unity was restored, and its story continued.

The church is still threatened if we overlook others because of ethnicity, gender, economics, or other characteristics today. May God give us eyes to see so that the story of his church continues, to his praise and glory!

Lord of the church, may we always remember that it is your church, not ours. Help us to live as your witnesses. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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