

16 October 2020

Playing Church

May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. — Romans 15.5-6

*The church is the church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell people of every calling what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others. — Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945, German), *Letters and Papers from Prison**

The Christian Church does not exist in heaven, but on earth and in time. — Karl Barth (1886-1968, Swiss)

The church is being called back to fulfilling the initial responsibility of ministering to the human condition. — [Brandon T. Crowley](#)

“Church” is too big of a topic, and always will be. Some have defined church as a people gathered, others as a people sent (both are true, but only true when there are both). We are always striving to live out the mission God has given the church, and why it’s important to continue to understand not only what this mission is, and not only how this mission is embodied at St. James, but also how our mission at St. James is lived out in this particular time. There will never be a final answer, I imagine, but it’s still vitally important that all of us keep wrestling with the question — “who are we?” — as we serve Jesus. First, a story:

A group of children, confined to a basement play area on a rainy day, decided to “play church.” One child was the preacher, another the organist, a couple kids were ushers, and the rest served as the congregation. One little guy said, “What about Jesus? Shouldn’t Jesus be in church?” The rest agreed and the child who made the point was made “Jesus.”

“What do I do?” he asked. “How do I play Jesus?”



He was told by some of the older children that they would tie him up to one of the support posts in the basement, pretending that it was the Cross. Then the others would call him names, throw things at him, and be mean to him in other ways. The little boy thought about that a minute and then said. "I don't want to play Jesus; let's just play church."

There are books about the church and the history of the church that could fill whole libraries. Of primary interest is the transition from being an outlaw religion to becoming a tolerated religion of the Roman Empire in 313 A.D. Finally Christians could stop fearing for their lives. This of course was welcome news, but some argue that this is when the church started down the road of playing church:

*For far too long, historians have accepted the claim that the conversion of the Emperor Constantine (ca. 285–337) caused the triumph of Christianity. To the contrary, he destroyed its most attractive and dynamic aspects, turning a high-intensity, grassroots movement into an arrogant institution controlled by an elite who often managed to be both brutal and lax.... Constantine's "favor" was his decision to divert to the Christians the massive state funding on which the pagan temples had always depended. Overnight, Christianity became "the most-favored recipient of the near limitless resources of imperial favors." A faith that had been meeting in humble structures was suddenly housed in magnificent public buildings—the new church of Saint Peter in Rome was modeled on the basilican form used for imperial throne halls. — Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery*, 2004.*

There are always dangers when the church gets to be too important, too favored, too comfortable. In other words, the danger to the church happens when it plays it too safe. Perhaps with Christ and his cross at the center we return to our mission and bring the hope of Jesus to our world and our communities:

The church is in favor of life. It rejects capital punishment. In a time when virtually no one challenges the rich and no one fights for the poor, the church, as Pope Francis has dramatically shown, is on their side. Sell what you have and give the money to the poor, the Savior says, and then come and follow me. No other major Western institution says this. No one else has contempt for getting and spending. No one else will befriend the condemned man, or the rapist, or the thief. As long as you are alive and in this world, the church has hope for you. When everyone else has given up on you, the church remains open. How many times do you forgive your brother or sister? Jesus suggests

that we do this no end of times. For the church, there is no such thing as human refuse. Everyone matters. Everyone is equal. What you do to the least of mine, you do to me, Jesus says, and sometimes the church tries to bear him out. — Mark Edmundson, Test of Faith, [American Scholar](#), September 7, 2015

I am writing this following last night's Congregational Council (on Zoom). It is a wonderful group of people, respectful of and kind to one another, and incredibly committed to you and the mission of St. James (as is your staff). I am grateful to call each one of them my friend. Yes, we discuss budgets and policies and programs, but the discussion is always about caring for and stewarding this treasure we have: the church — with Christ at the center. I am grateful for all of you, too, and may we continue to work together, serve one another, and strive to be a church that exists for others in this time and place.

—Pastor Peter

Prayer: *Gracious Father, we pray for your holy catholic church; fill it with all truth and peace. Where it is corrupt, purify it; where it is in error, direct it; where in anything it is amiss, reform it; where it is right, establish it; where it is in want, provide for it; where it is divided, reunite it; for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. Amen.* (ELW, p. 73)

Blest Be the Tie that Binds — Sara Groves (b. 1972)

In Christ There is No East or West — If you miss singing hymns with congregation and choir, here's a classic church hymn in a classic tune setting (*St. Stephen*). But if you're in the mood for a classic voice, check out **Mavis Staples' version**.

Stir Thy Church, O God Our Father (1982) — Christopher Parkening (b. 1947), classical guitar.