

## GOD'S GIFT OF THE CHURCH

Three Powerful Gifts Sermon Series, Week 3  
A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Ephesians 4:1-5, 15-16  
Matthew 16:15-18

August 17, 2025

Two weeks ago, we began our "Three Powerful Gifts" sermon series as we considered the gift of Holy Communion, and as we also personally received the blessing of that gift. Last Sunday, we considered the gift of Baptism and were blessed as that gift was poignantly emphasized by the baptism of little, Finnley Scott Collins. At the end of my message, I invited all of you to remember your baptism following worship by stopping at the baptismal font, dipping a couple fingers into the water and then making the sign of the cross on your forehead while saying, "Christ, I am yours." I also handed out a short prayer for you to take home and use daily to remember your baptism. If you didn't get one of those small prayer papers, and would like one, you can find them in the lobby on top of where the Bell Tower newsletters are placed.

Today, our powerful gift from God is the church. Often when we talk about the church, we refer to this place as "the church," and if we happen to drive by this building we think, "that's my church." And yet, I think we all know that the church is not ours, and this building is not the church.

When this church started being a church, there was no building. In Tom Mattern's history book of this church, he said, "*According to tradition, early Methodist classes were held in various homes. Joshua Overton, a stone mason who arrive in the village in 1836, conducted many of the early meetings*" (pg. 14). Tom also mentions specifically a class "*held above Charles Waldron's grocery store on Main Street...*" (pg. 14). It wasn't until about six years later, in 1842, that this church was incorporated. But then it took another four years before a lot was purchased across the street, and the first building was erected in 1846. People in Chagrin Falls who considered themselves Methodists were gathering, worshiping, studying, and serving at least 10 years before there was ever a building. Buildings are certainly important places of gathering and centers for ministry, but the church is not so much a place we go to but something we are.

In chapter 16 of Matthew's Gospel, we hear about a time when Jesus went to his disciples after they had been together for a while and asked, "Who do you say that I am?" (vs. 15). Apparently, most of the disciples were silent, but Simon speaks right up and says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God" (vs. 16). Jesus turns to Simon and says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah... I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (Ekklesia), and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (vs. 17-18).

Jesus made it clear that his church would be built on Peter's confession of faith which also became the confession of countless others, and it was built on Peter's leadership which also includes the leadership of countless others through the centuries. Sometimes, people will say something like, "I love Jesus, and I

want to follow him, but I don't need the church; in fact, I have no interest in the church." But the thing is, the church was Jesus' idea. It was a big idea that emphasized our need to be together if we are going to follow Jesus and be his disciples in the world.

So, let's unpack what it means to be the church. The Greek word "*Ekklesia*" is the word used for "church" in the New Testament. "*Ekklesia*" is a compound word that comes from "*Ek*" which mean "out" and "*Kaleo*" which means "call." To be the "*Ekklesia*," the church is to be called out. It was initially a secular word in the Greco-Roman world that referred to the assembly of people in a town who came together to debate, talk about, connect and fellowship while addressing the business of the town. It was a word used to describe congregating people. So, when early Christians were trying to decide on the term that they thought best described their gatherings, they chose "*Ekklesia*."

The English word "church" comes from the German word "Kirch." "*Kirch*" or "*Kirke*" is from the Greek word "*Kuriakon*" which means "belonging to the Lord." So the church is that which belongs to the Lord. As individual Christians, we decide to follow Jesus. We yield our lives to Jesus and invite him to save us and lead us. As those called to be the church, our primary question is never about what we want to do, but what Jesus wants to do. That's because a church does not belong to the pastor, the trustees, the laity, the denomination, it belongs to Jesus. So, the task of all churches, since we belong to the Lord is to figure out what Jesus wants us to do and then do it. As individual members of the church, it's also a question we should regularly ask ourselves.

Throughout the New Testament, one way we often see the church described is as a Family of Believers. This happens every time Paul and others refer to the people in the church as "brothers and sisters in Christ." This idea of being siblings is mentioned in the New Testament over 150 times. Because we are all children of God and we have a common faith in Christ we are family. Of course, like typical family members who have differences in opinions and disfunctions as imperfect, sinful human beings, the church also experiences differences and disfunctions. But despite this reality, we are called to love like Jesus. We are compelled to care for one another, serve one another, build one another up, encourage and teach one another, admonish one another and bear one another's burdens. And because we are all a bit messed up, we must also forgive one another. All of these "one another" statements are not only scriptural, they are also directives that require we be together and relate to one another as family.

Perhaps you have heard the word "*Koinonia*." It's a Greek word and it means "fellowship." It refers to our life together as a Christian community. As a church, we are Christ's community and we belong to him, but we are also bound to one another. We need to acknowledge our need for one another, and we need to realize that it takes not just some of our individual gifts but all of our gifts to care for one another and to do what Jesus wants us to do.

Every week, I have the joy of seeing this as I look out at all of you. What I see are people sitting in different places, most often your regular places. What I see are several women who have lost their husbands and men who have lost their wives sitting together, and finding strength and encouragement in one

another. When I made the announcement last week about Shirley Ashby's daughter, Kathy, dying, I saw your response, your concern, and I knew you would come alongside her and support her. Sometimes, because you are looking around and noticing others, you notice when someone seems upset, worried, tired or sitting alone and you go to that person. Sometimes you tell me what you have observed, and I am so thankful when you do. When you are observing those around you, greeting and talking with others, you notice someone you don't know, and you make a point of going up to that person so you can introduce yourself and talk with that person. Koinonia is about coming alongside to encourage and care for others in the family.

It is so important that our children, our youth and all of us have relationships that are built around our common faith. Fortunately, I see these relationships forming among the kids in Children's Worship, and the four youth who went through Confirmation class together earlier this year. I see these relationships forming and deepening in classes like the Journey's Sunday School class, and the Wonder Women study group, and the two Wesley Faith groups. Small groups, study and support groups, are great ways to connect with and encourage one another. I also see these relationships forming after worship during our fellowship time as well as during events like our Seniors of Faith luncheons. Finding and experiencing "Koinonia" is such an important part of life as a Christian. We need to take advantage of already existing opportunities but also create new opportunities to connect and develop friendships. It's what Jesus intended for us.

Over these past few years and especially since the Covid pandemic, there has been a lot of talk as well as studies on loneliness. In 2023, the US Surgeon General's published an article about the epidemic of loneliness and isolation. The article recommended the healing effects of social connection and community for mental and physical health. Part of the reason for so much loneliness is because we stopped doing the things that brought us together. Clearly, we have all seen worship attendance numbers decline – some are worshipping online and others have completely disappeared. Of course, I am glad we have an online option, so that those who are unable to be here in this sanctuary on Sunday morning for a variety of health reasons can still join their church family virtually. There are good reasons to worship online, but I encourage all who can come and be present in worship to do so as often as possible, because being a part of the worshipping and serving community is so essential to what it means to be the church.

I have one more point I want to make. We believe that in Christ, God took on flesh and walked on earth. Jesus incarnated God so that we might know God's love, grace, and mercy. Jesus went out into every town and village and cured every disease and sickness. He looked for those who were broken and struggling to bring healing and hope to them. Jesus was light and hope for the world, but as he was leaving, he said to his disciples that all these things were up to them; which means they are now up to us. *"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it"* (1 Corinthians 12:27), said Paul. As the church, we are to *"grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ..."* (Ephesians 4:15). To be the Body of Christ in the world is to be like Jesus and to take to

heart Jesus' life and words – words such as, *"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me"* (Matthew 25:35-36). When we put flesh on Christ and embody the Gospel message of love in the world, we push back the darkness of the world.

To be Christ's church is to be a community of those who belong to the Lord and who do what Jesus wants (Ekklesia); To be Christ's Church is to be a Family of Believers who love one another, encourage one another and bear one another's burdens (Koinonia). To be the Christ's church is to be the Body of Christ and to put flesh on Jesus every day by way of our presence and our actions in the world. Of course, to avail ourselves of the power of Christ's church, we have to show up, not just a couple of times a year, but regularly. God's gift of the church to the world is a powerful gift, the only gift in which Jesus said the "gates of Hades" cannot prevail against.

I invite you this day to do 3 things if you'd like to receive and be God's Gift of the church. I invite you to 1) Commit your life to Christ. 2) Connect with one another by engaging in worship and fellowship, and participating in a study group, a support group, or a ministry team. 3) And finally, be the Body of Christ by putting flesh on Christ and participating in outreach opportunities and supporting mission trips and special collections. Together, we are the church, and if you don't think that is a powerful, impactful gift, I encourage you to remember what Jesus said about the church and reconsider.

Let us pray...

Holy God, we thank you for the gift of the church. Jesus showed us and told us about the importance of gathering in community, of being in fellowship, of caring for one another and growing deeper in our faith together. Clearly, Jesus wants us to be his Body in the world, and so I pray that every person listening to this sermon today will feel moved and motivated to get more connected and to be more involved. May each one of us leave this service more committed to embodying your love and being your light in the world. Use us we pray in Christ's name. Amen.