

THE IDEAL CHURCH
Nehemiah 1:1-7; 2:1-8
1 Corinthians 12:12-18; 27-31
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, January 31, 2016

If you asked someone who is church shopping, "What does your ideal church look like?" You'd probably get answers like:

"My ideal church would be a place where the preacher can make the Bible relevant to my life."

"My ideal church would be a place where I feel welcomed accepted and loved."

"My ideal church would be a place that teaches Christian values."

My ideal church would be a place where I can make friends who share my beliefs and Christian values."

My ideal church would be a place offering a high quality worship, especially in the areas of music and preaching.

My ideal church would be a place that values tradition in a world that seems to be in a constant state of flux.

My ideal church would be a place where I can feel comfortable and affirmed as a person.

My idea of a church would be a place that offers interesting programs for me and the members of my family.

This is what most people are looking for when they go church shopping. The churches that appear to be growing have these same characteristics because they offer what many people are looking for.

We live in a consumer driven society and it's a buyer's market. Stores, car dealerships, restaurants, even hospitals sell themselves. And to make sure they outsell the competition they provide the best customized services possible.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. Competition is a good thing. Having choices is a good thing. Getting the best of the best is better than having no choice at all by having to settle for mediocre merchandise and terrible service.

But there's a dark cloud in this silver lining. Consumerism has spilled over to influence people when they go church shopping. They shop for a new church the same way they'd shop for a new car. You might be wondering, what's wrong with that? Why shouldn't people go

looking for a church that lives up to their expectations. Isn't the church supposed to serve people and meet their needs?

Of course the answer is yes. The church is supposed to serve people and meet needs. That's what Jesus of Nazareth was all about, serving people and meeting their needs. The problem is it's easy to fall in the trap of expecting your church to only serve YOUR needs.

I get angry and sad whenever I catch a few minutes of some of these televangelists who tell their audiences what they want here to make them feel good. They turn the gospel of Jesus Christ into a stained glass version of Dale Carnegie's course on how to win friends and influence people to your advantage. These motivational speakers fill their listeners' heads with sale pitches promising them the world.

But that's the problem. You don't go to church to learn how to buy into the world system, you go to church to learn how to be in the world but not of it. You don't go to church to be served but you do go to church to learn how to serve. You go to church to receive so that you have just enough to give away to the least of these, the very ones Christ came to seek out and bless.

Jesus invites you to come to him to be unburdened so he can send you back out into the world to help carry your neighbors' burdens.

The topic for today's sermon is what should the ideal church look like. Let's start with this. There is no such thing as the ideal church. Read Paul's letters in the New Testament. Too much of his writings are in response to churches behaving badly. There was strife over belief and practice. Personalities get in the way of the peace and purity that's supposed to be a hallmark of the beloved community. Too often those first century Christians just didn't get it. They became so obsessed with their rivalries they forgot their primary directive: to bring the love of Jesus in the power of his gospel to a broken, consumer ridden world. And by consumer ridden I mean a world where people are obsessed with having their wants met. That's probably the main reason why the world is in such a mess. We all want our wants met. We all want our fair share. And let's be honest, my fair share means having more than the guy next door.

So then, what should the ideal church look like? Maybe the ideal church would be a place where broken people can experience the transforming love of God and then be encouraged to take on the lifestyle of Jesus of Nazareth. That means putting other people first. Instead of pushing to the head of the line, you let other people get in front of you. Instead of demanding your fair share it means sharing what little you have confident God will always provide. It also means learning to trust God with your life. Crack that nut and everything else will fall into place.

That's easier said than done. It takes a willful intentional decision to trust in God. And it's not a one-time decision. You have to relearn how to trust in God all over again. You have to be released from the delusion that you can make things happen by sheer force of will. Just

because you're the loudest voice and hold all the good cards doesn't mean everything is going to turn out the way you want it to turn it.

This is true on so many different levels, especially in our relationships with family members, our coworkers, and our neighbors. Relationships are redeemed when you trust in God enough to lay down your rights and privileges at the foot of the cross. Then you can set aside your wants and wait for the Spirit to reveal God's will. Then you submit to God's will by becoming obedient to the Holy Spirit moving you in the direction God wants you to go, even though you may not want to go there.

One of the reasons I love the Bible is because these are stories God wants us to hear. The Holy Spirit enables us to see how these stories are really our stories, if we allow ourselves to enter into the plots and find ourselves in the characters' mishaps and triumphs.

A case in point is the Old Testament story of Nehemiah. It's a story about God opening doors, moving people's hearts and overcoming great obstacles to accomplish his purposes and restore his people. It's a story about a man trying to accomplish an impossible task by living out his God given impossible dream.

Nehemiah, a Jew, was a servant of the King of Persia. The Persians just conquered the Babylonians who had conquered God's people and kept them in captivity for 70 years. Given the choice, many of the Jews returned to Jerusalem. Nehemiah chose to stay behind until he heard how his fellow Jews back home were in "great trouble and shame" because Jerusalem, the city of David, was left in ruins. When Nehemiah first heard this bad news he sat down and wept. But he also prayed that God would use him to restore Jerusalem and more importantly restore his people.

This is how God works. God's vision for us begins when a dream is planted in a believer's heart and against all odds that person begins to make that impossible dream a reality. And take note that Nehemiah begins his quest with the fervent prayer. "Lord, empower me, equipped me, and guide me." Then he waited. Nehemiah waited for cues from God, if only because he didn't know what to do next.

Soon enough the cues started coming. Nehemiah experienced God orchestrating events, opening doors and showing the way. Here's how. One day, unexpectedly, the King of Persia asked Nehemiah, "Why is your face so sad" I wonder how often does a busy king take notice of one of the servant's mood swings and is concerned about it? Nehemiah took advantage of the King's interest and told him about the sorry state of his fellow Jews back in Jerusalem as well as his passion to go and help them rebuild the city and restore their lives. Suddenly the king surprised Nehemiah when he asked, "How long will you be gone and when can you return to me?" Certainly God influenced the King not only to let Nehemiah go to Jerusalem but to also empower Nehemiah with the needed resources to get the job done.

We need to learn from this story an important lesson. Usually when we are faced with an overwhelming challenge our first response is to panic and become negative. It's that attitude that keeps many of us stuck in our place. But once we calm ourselves down and allow our potential for faith to take over, that's when we begin to catch God's vision for us.

We start believing the impossible is possible because we believe all things are possible with God. A few weeks ago I preached on the text, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." I can do whatever God called me to do. Whenever God gives me a vision, God will send me helpers, God will give me resources. God will make it happen because it's God's will.

Getting back to Nehemiah, when he returned to Jerusalem to to make God's will a reality, he faced many obstacles and powerful enemies, one in particular by the name of Sanballet. He did everything he could to stop Nehemiah in his tracks. Through it all, God frustrated Sanballet's plots as he inspired Nehemiah to build up the confidence of the Jews. After years of setbacks and frustrations they finally began to catch Nehemiah's vision. They stopped feeling hopeless and made the commitment to work hard with joyful and confident hearts and trust in God's grace.

In Nehemiah 6:15 we read, "So the wall was completed on the 25th day of Elul in 52 days. When all our enemies heard about this all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence because they realized our work has been done with the help of our God."

You may be wondering why was it so important to build that wall around Jerusalem? The answer is simple. More than restoring a wall God was restoring his people. Coming together against all odds to build a wall was really all about building trust. The people had to learn to trust God but also to trust in each other because they had a greater task. To show the world that their God is God. They were the chosen people, chosen to be a light and a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

We are the Church, the body of Christ. All of us our members of Christ body. Each part of the body, each one of you is it essential. God needs each of us, God needs all of us to accomplish the impossible dream in the neighborhood we find ourselves in. God needs us to be an ideal church. What does an ideal church look like?

An ideal church is the place where people talk more about the Kingdom of God than they do about the local church.

An ideal church is the place where you are more in awe of the radical nature of Christ than you are in your preferred style of worship.

An ideal church is a place where people who look different than most of us are genuinely welcomed with open arms.

An ideal church is a place where the members not only associate with other Christians but never miss an opportunity to hang out with people who aren't.

An ideal church is a place where do you feel free to spill your guts whenever you are asked in passing, "how are you today?"

An ideal church is a place where people celebrate the spiritual depth and authenticity of people who never attend church.

An ideal church is a place where people are more concerned about the material and spiritual needs of non-numbers in our neighborhood than they about the upkeep of the building and meeting the budget.

This is God's vision for the ideal church. An impossible dream? Only if we say so.

Let us pray.