

April 10, 2005

Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

“You Call This A Church? (\*Based on a sermon by William Willimon.)

John 20:19-22 NLT

That evening, on the first day of the week, the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! "Peace be with you," he said. 20 As he spoke, he held out his hands for them to see, and he showed them his side. They were filled with joy when they saw their Lord! 21 He spoke to them again and said, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 Then he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

### **A Pitiful Bunch (v19a )**

“...the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid...”

Look at this pitiful group of Christ's followers. Just look at them. You call this a church? In many of the previous chapters of John's Gospel, Jesus has been preparing His disciples for His arrest, death and resurrection. He had gone over it again and again. But it's like they weren't even listening. Just look at them, frightened, hiding behind closed doors. Some disciples they are, huh?

They were supposed to be the ones confidently going out into to the world, announcing the triumph of Jesus over sin and death. They were to be the ones who would continue the work of Jesus. But look at them hiding, hoping that nobody in town will know they are there. You call this a church?

Oh, on the one hand I guess we can understand their reaction. After all, the last week didn't exactly pan out like they hoped it would. They signed on for a revolution, and, well, it just didn't seem to work out the way they expected.

And now, just hours after the discovery of the empty tomb, they just want to fade into the woodwork. It's not that they didn't know. Mary had made the announcement; "I have seen the Lord!" she told them. Peter and John had seen the empty tomb and John saw and believed. But even that good news didn't launch them out into their mission. They are a pathetic bunch on this first Easter evening. Why, this could hardly be called a church at all. They have no plan, no mission, no conviction, no nothing. You call this a church?

We've come a long way, haven't we? Or have we? We talk about reaching people for Christ, but overall the statistics tell us that the church in America is declining. If the trend continues or unless there is a new reformation, by the time we reach 2010 we are told that there will a much smaller percentage of Americans who claim to be Christians than there are today. Most denominations are closing churches faster than we are planting new ones. The attendance of most churches is either in plateau or decline. A few are growing, but even most of those are growing due to transfer growth and not new people coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

We're called to be a people going into our world with the gospel. But let's look at the facts.

The world around us is changing at an unprecedented pace. In the marketplace, what worked 10 years ago is obsolete. Cultural analysts estimate that our culture reinvents itself every 3 to 5 years. In other words, our society's language, customs, dress, style, leisure pursuits, relational emphases, values, etc. are being substantially reshaped and changed every few years. However, at the same time, most American churches are holding fast to programs and goals established years ago. We tend to respond to changes in the culture with cosmetic changes in the way we do church-changes that have virtually no impact.

You might say, "But we hear stories all the time of hundreds of people being reached for Christ." (e.g. through Billy Graham Crusades). Well, consider this: in studies conducted just a few years ago, it was found that a majority (over 50 percent) of the people who made first-time decisions for Christ were no longer connected to a Christian church within just eight weeks of that decision.

The church is called to care for the least of all people and to be known by the quality of its love and compassion. We are called as the Church of Jesus to break down racial and national barriers, but Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour in American life, even 30 years after Martin Luther King made that observation.

Most churches still struggle with 20% of the people doing 80% of the work. Most churches struggle financially – a recent poll stated that only 7% of born-again Christians tithe.

So, you call this a church? You see, I think it could be so easy for us to get a little down on these disciples for being so fearful and ineffective. But could it be that this picture of the earliest Christians, hiding behind locked doors, afraid of the big, bad world and what it might do to them; is it possible that this is a picture of today's church? The power of Almighty God has been unleashed on the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The mission of announcing the victory to the world has been given, and yet so often Christians are found hiding out behind locked doors.

But that's the not the whole story, because in spite of fear and locked doors, the risen Christ finds His way in. And He says to these disciples, and to us, "Peace be with you!"

#### **A Peace Bestowed (v19b, 21a)**

“Peace be with you...”

Isn't that amazing? I mean, what would you say to a group of people that you had poured your whole life into, trying to get them ready for a mission, only to find them sitting on their hands? I think I'd want to say something like, "What are you doing? Why aren't you out there getting on with the task? What's wrong with you people?" But did you notice that Jesus does not rebuke them because of the fear that has paralyzed them and driven them into hiding? In fact, they are not even given a pep talk and told to get out there and get busy. Instead, Jesus gives them the only thing that can change this pitiful group of followers into a real church. He breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit (v22).

### **A Promise Breathed (v22)**

“...He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”

Jesus invites them to receive the gift of the Spirit after He compels them to go into the world with this commission, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).

### **A Passed Baton (v21)**

“As the Father has sent Me, so I send you.”

Have you ever really thought about that? What does Jesus mean, "As the Father has sent me"? How is our life as the church to mirror the way He was sent? I know the immediate context is His resurrection, but for the last seven or eight chapters the focus has been on the Cross. That's where He was sent. He was sent to suffer and die. He was sent to pour out His life for others. Jesus was sent by the Father to die, to give His life, to be broken in body and in heart, to connect with rebels and misfits. "As the Father has sent me." Could it be that what makes us the church is when we engage in that kind of Jesus ministry? And could it also be that much of what we do, calling it church, is nothing more than hiding behind locked doors? We are sent to pour out our lives for a broken and lost world. And the only way to accomplish that is to allow the risen Christ to breathe on us and through us the life-giving message of peace and forgiveness.

I guess the real question for us is still, "Are we willing to be that kind of church?" I sometimes hear people talk about being dissatisfied with their church. Do you know what I usually hear? Well, they don't like this program or that ministry. They wish we sang more hymns and fewer choruses, or they wish we sang more choruses and fewer hymns. Or they don't like the personality of this pastor or that pastor. Or they just aren't paid enough attention or somebody hurt their feelings or somebody talked about them behind their backs. Fill in the blank-it all boils down to a self-centered understanding of what it means to be part of the church. We are not here only to get what we want to get from the church, but for what we can give to the church. We are not here just to be ministered to but to find a way to serve and minister to others.

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." What would that look like? Well, I think it would look an awful lot like embracing those who come to our church, even those who just don't seem to fit in-and not noticing the outward appearance, but seeing the heart, and welcoming them and loving them, even when they seem not to be very interested.

I think it would look an awful lot like building friendships with those outside the church so that maybe, just maybe, we can share our testimony with them. I think it would look an awful lot like people who are salt and light – people of integrity and godly living that are not blending into the world. Rather the world sees a difference and is drawn to that difference, which is Christ in us. People with better marriages because they work at it applying Biblical principles and are seeking to be more like Jesus.

I think it would look an awful lot like a group of people who will give up every night for a whole week this summer to be a part of a Vacation Bible School so that maybe we'll get a chance to share Jesus with a child and a family. I think it would be people volunteering to help in other ways in the children's ministry, in Sunday School for example so children could be ministered to; Or volunteering to help in the teen ministry, (e.g.) on

Friday nights once a month at the gym so teens can hear the message of Christ; Or being more involved with Alpha that is being used by God in a mighty way to bring people into His Kingdom and building them in their faith; Or some other ministry - visiting someone in the hospital, making a meal for someone with a need, contacting people we haven't seen in awhile, letting visitors know that we are so glad they came to our church and we want them to come back and we want them to know Jesus; accepting people where they are and pointing them to Jesus.

It would look an awful lot like seeing the importance of joining a home fellowship or other small group to know other Christians to learn the Bible, pray for needs and support one another. A group that would rather pray than gossip, that would rather build up than tear down, that would rather support than criticize, that would rather love than be self-protective, that would rather give than take, that would rather work it out than check out.

I think it would look an awful lot like the kingdom of God, where Jesus is first and people are learning to lay down their lives in order to bless others. Where forgiveness and grace reign. Where love is the defining mark of relationships.

You call this a church? Yes, I would call that a church. When the spirit of Jesus comes upon us and moves us out from the safety of our little group into the world to lay down our lives in love, that is when we have a church.

Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." Folks, we are people of resurrection and hope and eternal life. And do you know what that means? It means that we are not afraid to move out into the world and lay down our lives and give ourselves up because we truly are in Christ and He is truly in us and with us -receive His Holy Spirit.

So, may I ask you, in what way are you laying down your life for the Kingdom? In what way are you pouring your life out for others? If you are honest, is your life more about what you want and what you need or what you are being called to give as an ambassador of Christ Jesus?

"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."