

How I Misunderstood the Church

**September 7, 2008 | Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 18)**

Lectionary citations

Ex 12:1-14 with Ps 149

Rom 13:8-14

Matt 18:15-20

About 10 years ago, I began a period of my life where I felt consciously called to Christian service. It was the first time in my life that I began to identify myself primarily as a Christian. That is, I was not a computer networking instructor who happened to be a Christian. Instead, I was a Christian who happened to also be teaching some computer classes. If someone asked me “what do you do?” I would try to remember to answer, “I’m a Christian.” I was a Christian first. All my other roles in life—son, father, husband, teacher—were secondary. I became extremely church active—deacon, Sunday school teacher, choir member and I threw myself into mission activities. I listened to Christian music, read the Bible, and socialized with other Christians. All well and good.

However, there is one thing about my conversion that I have to look back at with an embarrassment and maybe a little shame. Whether I would have admitted it, I believed that I was living something of a charmed life. After all, I was living life “as if” I was in the Kingdom of God. I was proud of my decision for Christ and I felt that thanks to my choice, my life would just get better and better. Well, it did, but not in the way that I expected. In a few short months, my wife divorced me, I lost my job, and I developed serious health problems. Since I was a deacon and my wife was a pastor, I took the easy way out and blamed the church for our divorce. In anger, I resigned from my church and the denomination. I responded to a crisis in my relationship with the church with the typical American option: exit. I was hurt and angry, so I left.

Nevertheless, underneath my confusion and anger, there must have been a core of spiritual maturity. Strangely enough, I never blamed God for my misfortunes and never really questioned my need to be church involved. At first, I blamed my old congregation and pastor for my troubles, for not doing something to protect me. However, even that feeling was short-lived. Even though I moved along to a new church in a new town, I had to admit that I missed my old congregation and pastor and did my best to make amends for my earlier harsh statements.

My expectations of the church were unrealistic and reflected my wishful thinking about the Christian life. A careful reading of the New Testament shows that from the earliest time, the church experienced sin, division, and conflict among its members. This was something I had forgotten in my conversion enthusiasm: the church is made up of flawed human beings and a life in the church is not guaranteed to be free of conflict and unhappiness.

There were apparently enough sinners in the early church that they needed a formal judicial process. The requirement for witnesses comes from the Book of Deuteronomy, "One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If conflict is irreconcilable, the outcome is a broken relationship—"treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Although we might tend to idealize the early church—after all these were people who knew Jesus in person—there was apparently enough serious sinning going on that the disciplinary process needed Jesus' authority to bind and loose...the same authority given to Peter earlier in the Gospel.

The procedure described is designed to give an opportunity for repentance, a turning away from sin so that the offender could return to the community. However, it seems somewhat ironic that the unrepentant members were treated like "pagans and tax collectors," just the people who Jesus and the Apostles ate with, healed, and shared the Good News with. Such a procedure can obviously be used to misguidedly attempt to purify the church of all sinners. How can the church be a hospital for sinners if we kick out all the sinners? Who will be left to turn out the lights?

In the long history of the church judicial and disciplinary proceedings have been misused and corrupted so often that some congregations and denominations have abandoned any attempt to regulate the moral lives of church members. As long as someone minimally behaves himself or herself while in the church building, the church quite deliberately turns a blind eye towards their conduct out in the world. Because church action against sinners has so often been a cover for hypocrisy and prejudice, it seems better to ignore the problem and hope it will go away.

So is the church just another imperfect human organization with imperfect judicial procedures? Today's Gospel makes it sound like one. However, beneath the matter-of-fact judicial procedure is a spiritual struggle. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Corinthians. A man has been guilty of a serious sexual immorality, "of a kind that even the pagans do not tolerate." Paul asks that the man be "put out of fellowship." However, this punishment is not for the comfort or convenience of the community. Paul's concern is for the spiritual welfare of the transgressor, "So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord."

Every action of the church has human and spiritual dimensions because the church also has those two dimensions. The visible, the human dimension has a superficial resemblance to other human organizations. Churches can succeed or fail in the marketplace just like other organizations. Depending on our skills and talents, the condition of the economy, social trends, and other mundane factors, a congregation may flourish or wither as a "provider of religious programs and services." We need to remember, however, that each congregation and denomination is part of the Church with a capital "C," the church universal, or what I will call the spiritual church in this sermon. The church is like an iceberg: just as the portion of the iceberg visible above the water represents only a tiny part of its bulk, the church visible in our lives represents a tiny outcrop of the spiritual church. Despite the very human failings of our congregations and denominations, the spiritual church was created by God, is governed by the Son who is the only leader of the church, and is energized by the Holy Spirit. The human

members of this church are just that: “members,” who carry out the will of the Son, using the gifts given them by the Holy Spirit. In this church, we are the fragile vessels, the “jars of clay” that God has chosen to bring his Word to the world.

However, the visible church and the spiritual church can never be separated. There is only one church. The spiritual church is the visible church, as it will be glorified in the Kingdom of God. For our salvation, God has graciously adopted us into the church, the living body of his son Jesus Christ. The church does not need us. However, we need the church more than we could ever imagine. We need the church because it is by being part of the church that we will be saved. The Holy Spirit is never given to individuals, except, as they are members of the church. Our sacraments of Baptism and Communion are acts of membership, of coming into relationship with God as a community, not as individuals. This is why Paul saw removing someone from the community as a “turning them over to Satan.” For Paul and the early Christians there was no possibility of an individual relationship with God outside of the community of faith.

The hard lesson I had to learn was that there is a big difference between worldly success—even churchly success—and salvation, even in a church-centered life. I thought that by becoming a Christian, I expected the church to take care of me, to shield me from life’s struggles. I had to learn that the church does not serve me. I serve God through the church. Giving my worldly life a religious coat of paint really did nothing. A car with a Jesus fish on the back is still a car. Because I saw my life in the church as an extension of my worldly life, a way of making life nicer and more pleasant, I was disappointed. Making the church the central focus of our lives is always a good thing. However, I have learned that it is dangerous to think that the visible aspects of the church—this building, this congregation, this denomination—are all that the church is. It means seeing the visible church as a passing sign of the spiritual church, just as this life is a sign of the eternal life to come. Life in the spiritual church is always pushing us away from the passing things of this world, including the things of the visible church, and pulling us towards the Kingdom of God. The visible church is a light in the darkness, but we will all need eventually to step from the darkness into the light, giving up all the teddy bears, night-lights, and other comforts of life in the darkness. As Paul says in today’s Epistle:

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Amen.

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