

Three Reasons I Miss the Church at Grace

As we begin this morning, let me give an update. Our last meeting together was Sunday, March 8. My sermon was on the immutability of God from James 1. And though COVID-19 was spreading throughout the world, little did we know that 7 weeks later we would still be in the same situation. The YMCA is still closed, but we are hopeful that this will change as soon as possible. As an elder body we have been meeting weekly through Zoom meetings. We also had one short meeting with both the deacons and the elders and decided, at least for the time being, to continue giving our monthly rent. Through the years we have helped the Y financially over and above our rent to help with flooring, chairs, and even youth programs. And we feel that keeping our rent going for now is the right thing to do.

Also, as you may have heard, the AMP meeting in Turkey has been cancelled this year. Gil is working on getting a refund and we will keep you informed about next year's meeting; as we certainly will keep that event on the calendar. Concerning the 2nd part of that trip, those who are travelling to Istanbul, it has not been officially been cancelled. But, it is highly likely. We will keep you informed and let you know as soon as we do. Our ladies' prayer group met this week through Zoom. Also, at least one home group has done the same for the last 3 weeks. I'm not sure how well we've done, but our elders and home group leaders have been calling and checking in on all of you. None of our folks have contracted the virus, at least that we know, though some of our friends and relatives have. We've sent out periodic prayer requests. Please continue to let us know how we can pray. If you have any questions, any comments, any thing at all you want to share with the elders, please call us.

With these things in mind, I would like to share three reasons I miss the church at Grace. And these are not random reasons. These reasons are related to essential biblical truths about the church, particularly the local church as opposed to the universal church.

1. I Miss All of You. We are still small enough that we all know certain things about one another that we miss. I'm going to pick on some of you. I miss the way Scott Blackledge dresses in the winter, and the shoes he wears. I miss Olivia's face when I use her in a sermon illustration. (I can picture her even now. She gets it from her mother.) I miss making fun of Joe (as he does the same to me). Even now I am laughing as I picture the Jones girls. I miss the way Sean fixes my microphone. On an on I could go. But, I don't simply miss you because of these things. I miss you because you are the people of God.

Here, the specific truth about the church is that the people ARE the church, not the building, and not the specific place they meet. Some of you may remember when we first started meeting together and I would often say, "*Thank you for bringing the church to the South Rowan Cafeteria,*" or "*Thank you for bringing the church to the building.*" When Jesus says, "***I will build my church***" (Matt. 16:18), He is speaking about a specific group of people. These are the people John saw in Rev. 5:9 as he says, "***And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation . . .'***" Brothers and sisters, we are those whom Christ has ransomed.

We are the recipients of the atoning work of Christ. The blood of Christ has covered our sins. Jesus laid down his life as a substitute sacrifice in our place, as the verse we just read says, “**and by your blood you ransomed people for God . . .**” The Son of God was punished for our crimes. And He bore the full penalty for our sins. And as his people, we have been set free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2). And God has given us the Holy Spirit to dwell within us (Rom. 8). This means there is a special union between us. And because of this, not only do I love you, but I miss you when we are not able to meet.

Now, I love God’s people all over the world. Just this week, I heard from brother Wambua in Kenya. And I miss him and love him as he is my brother in Christ. But, I don’t miss him and love him in exactly the same way I love all of you. Why? Because YOU are the flock of God entrusted to my care and the same goes for all our elders, who feel the same as I do. The Apostle Peter says to our elders: “**So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you . . .**” (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Paul tells the elders in Ephesus: “**Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.**” There is a special bond between the shepherd and the sheep. Often, we see this in Paul’s letters as he is separated from those he loves.

His favorite word for the people of the church is beloved. “**To Timothy, my beloved child . . .**” (2 Tim. 1:2). “**To Philemon our beloved fellow worker**” (Philemon 1:1). He writes to the Philippians: “**Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.**” We see the same language with the other writers of the NT as well. Brothers and sisters, my beloved, I especially feel this during this time that we are not able to see one another weekly. And I long to see your faces soon. Now, to the 2nd reason I miss the church at Grace.

2. I Miss Meeting Together. Here, my emphasis is on the assembly of God’s people. The church of God is a people that meets regularly, a people that assembles. Heb. 10:25 commands us “**not to forsake the gathering together of God’s people.**” Why? There are a lot of reasons that I won’t mention this morning. But, I want to emphasize that the Bible is clear: The Church is a people . . . that meets together in a particular place. In this way, the church is an assembly. Now, keep that thought for a moment as I need to give some explanation about the nature of the church.

In order to do this, let’s go back a bit to the beginning of the NT. It is interesting that when Jesus begins his public ministry, he speaks about the Kingdom of God coming. “**Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand**” (Mark 1:15). He tells us who will receive the kingdom (Matt. 5:3). He tells his followers to pray for it, seek it, and proclaim it (Matt. 6:10, 33; 10:7). He demonstrates its power when he binds the satanic strong man (Matt. 12:27-29). He promises to reveal the secrets of the kingdom (13:11). Most of his parables speak of the building of this great kingdom. And then right in the middle of all this preaching/teaching about the kingdom he seems to change gears. He says, “**I will build my church**” (Matt. 16:18).

Therefore, I must ask, “*Is Christ building a kingdom, or is he building the church?*” Of course, we must say Christ is doing both. But, why in the context of “kingdom” does he emphasize the building of the church? Don’t you find it strange that as he speaks about the GREAT KINGDOM OF GOD, that he then emphasizes the building of the “church?” Well, Jesus doesn’t change the subject with Peter because after he says “I will build my church,” he also says, “**I will give you the keys of the kingdom**” (v. 19). This means the church and the kingdom are related; they go hand in hand.

Now, think for a moment back to our first truth. The Church is the “people” of God. Why doesn’t Jesus say, “*I will build my ‘people’?*” “People” and “church” are different terms in the Greek language. Jesus says, “*I will build my church.*” The Greek word is *ekklesia*. And its meaning is very specific. It literally means “those who are called out.” But, the meaning goes way deeper, and when the people of that day heard that word (*ekklesia*) they would not have been mistaken. In the Greek and Roman world, *ekklesia* meant an assembly. Five hundred years before Jesus, this was a popular word; and it was primarily a political word. In every city, the citizens would come together as particular assembly in order to have meetings or to vote or to debate, to discuss government business. The meaning was clear. It was a people gathering in a place for official business. Johnathan Leeman explains it this way: “*If you had said to Aristotle, the ekklesia is a people, not a place right?*” *He would have looked at you cockeyed. “The people are the people he would have said.” “And to be an ekklesia they have to gather in a place.” Ekklesia is tied to a place. The people had to gather together in a place in order to be an assembly (ekklesia). So, when the ekklesia no longer gathered, they could not be called an ekklesia. (And we can trace this meaning to Jesus’ time as well.)*

Now, back to our truth. The word in English is “church.” Do you see how much we miss when we hear this word? Now, this word means so much more than just a people that gathers. But, it doesn’t mean less. This means we are the people of God that assembles. From this perspective, If you take away the regular assembly of God’s “called out ones,” God’s people, you take away the church. That’s what we do! We gather in a place as the church. For this reason, I miss the assembly of God. By the Spirit of God, this is hard-wired into me and into us as God’s people. And now, more than ever, I am longing to meet with all of you, my beloved! And you feel the same! Zoom meetings are ok, but they are not the same. With this in mind, I must remind us that phone calls, computer meetings, listening to good sermons, and even gathering with our families who are also Christians, is NOT THE SAME as what we do at the YMCA on Sundays.

Brothers and sisters, this is God's design for his people. We are the church. We are the people . . . that gathers. Why do you think in places like China or Turkmenistan or certain Muslim countries, it is illegal to have gatherings of Christians? Because Satan knows if you take away the gathering, you take away the church. But, don't be alarmed. God's people will always gather. They will gather in homes. They will gather in caves. They will gather underground. They will gather. For Jesus says, "***I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail.***" And let me be clear about where I stand in this current crisis. I do not believe the restrictions placed on churches is just for us. Our entire culture is being affected. Christians and non-Christians alike are in the same boat. And for now, we are being good citizens. And we will continue do subject ourselves to our civil authorities and for the love of our neighbor, even if they are wrong . . . We will leave the timing into God's hands and take things week by week. And, beloved, those who have the Spirit of God, week by week in which we do not meet, we will grow in our longing for our assembly.

Let's just say for a moment that it would become illegal permanently (for this is not permanent) for the church to gather. This would be one of those times we must disobey. And Christians are doing this all over the world now. But, hopefully, we will not have to cross that bridge in this country. We must still pray as Paul instructs Timothy, "**First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth**" (1 Tim. 2:1-4). Therefore, brothers and sisters, pray this way! Now, let's move on to a third reason I miss the church at Grace.

3. I Miss What We Do Together. The church is a people. The church is a people that gathers in a particular place. The church is a people that gathers with a purpose. Think back to my previous thoughts on the Kingdom and the Church. Remember, I asked, “*Why does Jesus introduce this word ‘church’ into his teaching about the kingdom?*” Why does Jesus use such a political word to describe the people of God and what they do? It is because, as the church, the gathering of God’s people, we do the business of the kingdom. We could say the church is the means to the building of the kingdom. This is why kingdom and church go hand in hand. We represent the king and are citizens of his kingdom. This means that everything we do together as a church proclaims our King and his kingdom.

Think about an embassy. I remember when we lived in Russia as foreigners. No matter how well I spoke or understood local culture, I was always an outsider. But, every few years, someone in our family’s passport would expire or run out of extra pages in the back. And when this happened, we would take the overnight train to Moscow and head to the US Embassy. There was always a line . . . but, not for citizens. All the foreigners were in different lines, but there was always one door for US citizens. And when you walked through the doors, it was as if you left Russia and entered the USA. Everyone spoke English. Everyone welcomed you. Everyone was helpful. Why? Because that Embassy, that place, was American property. Everything in it rang of American culture. And every American Embassy is like this in the countries of the world. Why? Because each embassy is an outpost, a little piece of geography that is American. And the purpose of an embassy is to do the business of America.

In the same kind of way, each local church is a little piece of geography filled with the subjects of the King and his Kingdom. As I walked through the doors of the Russian Embassy and found myself in “America,” when we meet with God’s people and do what we do in our gathering we do the business of the King and his kingdom. We are God’s geographical outpost to proclaim his glory! And yes, even during this time when we are not meeting, I can still do the business of the king. I can lead my family in worship. I can evangelize my neighbors. I can do unto others as I would have them do to me. (Many other things) But, I miss what we do together when we gather. I miss the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. I miss the singing of hymns and Psalms and spiritual songs as we raise our voices and our hearts to worship the King. I miss our prayers together as approach the throne of grace together in our assembly. I miss the giving of our resources one to another. I miss using my spiritual gift/s in the edifying of the body of Christ. I miss taking the Lord’s supper together. (I hope it is evident to you why we have not chosen to take the supper together virtually or with our families. I believe strongly that we must wait until we come together again.) My heart longs for these things!

I miss you. I miss gathering with you at the YMCA. I miss what we do together. And the longing grows with every passing day! Therefore, let these words and truths sink in as we long for one another. In the meantime, continue to spend daily time in the Word. Families, continue doing family worship. Continue to join in on Sundays to listen to the sermon, knowing that weekly, I preach not to other Christians (though some may listen), I preach to you, and for you. At the same time, continue to listen to other sermons. I think I've listened to many since this all began. And as always, look unto Christ as the author and perfecter of your faith. All God's blessings are found in Him. May he be more beautiful to you every day! Press on brothers and sisters! . . . Until we meet again!