**Why Jesus? Why the Church? Why This Church?**

Over the past four weeks, we have been exploring the theme of Discovering Joy through simplicity and generosity, using a book entitled "Enough" by Adam Hamilton, Senior Pastor at the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. In a previous book of his, he challenges the church to answer three basic questions that are key to growth and survival. As we come to this Commitment Sunday and the celebration of Thanksgiving, it seemed to me that these questions were wonderful questions for today because they will help us to focus on the things that we need to be most thankful for in this season of gratitude, and then from our gratitude springs the commitments that we will make for the coming year. The three questions you can see in the title of this sermon: Why Jesus? Why the Church? And Why This Church?

For too long, the church has acted like a parent around these questions with a classical answer: "Because I said so." But that does little to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and make new disciples for the transformation of the world. We can no longer assume that the answers to this question are either obvious or universally known. And for all who claim the name of Jesus and seek to follow him, it is a good reminder for us, as it was for me in preparing this sermon.

Question #1 - Why Jesus?

We no longer live in a world where the Judeo-Christian world view is the only game in town. Increased globalization, immigration from places other than Western Europe, and an increasingly secularized society provide a broader range of options, including the option of no religious affiliation. So why do people need Jesus? I would suggest to you three primary answers:

1. Jesus gives us a direction and meaning for life outside of the church. We sometimes forget that Jesus did not come to the earth to talk about temple or synagogue reform; he did not talk about how to behave in church; and much of his teaching was not about religious matters. Jesus came to teach us about living the abundant life in a way that is joy-filled and hopeful. He came to teach us about how to live every day, so that we might reflect in our lives the image of God that is at the heart of our being. For by following Jesus, we will find contentment and happiness in all we do.

2. Jesus tells us the truth. People are looking for happiness and meaning. These are good goals for everyone, but the process is as important as the product, and when the means for attaining these goals are misdirected, we find ourselves further from attaining the prize of a joy-filled life. Even though the truth seems difficult, such as loving your neighbor, forgiving and praying for your enemy, reaching out to the poor and the marginalized, or surrendering our lives wholly into the hands of God, we discover that these challenges really work to make our lives fuller and more complete. I don't always like what Jesus says, but when I adhere to the truth of Jesus Christ, I find happiness and meaning not just in myself, but in my relationships with friends, family, society and the world.

3. In Jesus Christ, we come into a meaningful relationship with God. For too many people, God is abstract at best, distant and remote, disconnected from human reality. It is an image that is quite common among various world religions throughout history. But with Jesus Christ, we see God in our midst, God drawing close, demonstrating love, lifting us up when we have fallen, drawing close when we are alone, offering us comfort in the midst of sorrow and strength in times of weakness. Only in Jesus can we experience the fullness of God's gift of love – what in church language we call grace. For many, the divine-human relationship is something like an e-harmony.com relationship – distant and somewhat mysterious because there is no flesh and blood over the internet. But with Jesus, we are meeting God face to face, and this is how people really fall in love with each other. Jesus is the way for us to fall in love with God, and to experience God's love deeply, personally, and passionately. I know of nothing that will bring us more joy than that deep, loving relationship with the source of our lives.

These are all non-churchy ways to talk about what we call salvation, a word derived from the same root as the word salve, a word that means health and wholeness in our relationship with God and neighbor – this is salvation – this is why we need Jesus.

So, if we have Jesus Christ, and this meaningful relationship, why the church?

This is a good question. I would share with you three primary answers to this question:

1. We were not created to live out life by ourselves. This has already been affirmed by the second chapter of Genesis. The church is the community where we live out our spiritual journeys, we are kept accountable to follow the ways of God. At its best, it is the community of faith that encourages us on the journey that keeps us on the path to faithfulness, and prevents us from being tossed to and fro with the winds of the moment. Like the geodesic dome, a form able to withstand high winds, the church is a myriad of relationships that serve to do God's will in a challenging world.

2. The church is the living body of Christ for the world we live in. This is found in the scriptures, and it was for this that faithful men and women lost their lives. No one person, not even one individual congregation, can reflect the totality of Jesus Christ for the world. If there is to be a transformation of the world, there isn't a single way, nor a single person, who can demonstrate the kind of transforming power that God has – but together, with a variety of ideas, styles, and practices, we work with other Christians to provide a clearer picture

3. The church helps us look beyond ourselves and encourages us when we are living in counter cultural ways, when our values are under fire from the forces of evil that lie beyond us and over which we have no control. We are not standing alone, but with other faithful people and with Jesus Christ who is in our midst when two or more gather – not through the individual.

So, why this church? This is the question that we need to answer if we are to be faithful in calling new persons of faith. And as I reflect on this question, I am excited, thrilled, and thankful, because there are so many good answers that we often don't lift up enough.

1. We have a mission to bring all people into a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ – all people, not just those we like, not just those who are like us, not just those fit a profile – all people. Inclusivity is not an empty phrase at the Butler UMC – we live it out through ministries such as the Senior/Retired persons worship, Hispanic Ministry, our new Wellspring Ministry whose primary purpose will be to reach those who don't particularly respond well to traditional church. A commitment to this kind of inclusiveness will not always be popular, but it will be faithful. This is a mark of integrity.
2. We are a generous church. While getting the everyday bills paid takes careful planning and sometimes requires doing things ourselves rather than doing hiring things out, we have not sacrificed our mission, reaching out beyond ourselves. We have not allowed fear to overcome faith. We continue to give out food to more than 100 people monthly, we have seen an increased amount of clothing and other items we have given away through Gleaners to those who are really hurting, our mission team to Red Bird is larger than ever, the number of children sponsored through Compassion and Watoto in Uganda has increased. And as we are generous, we have inspired others to generosity in our community. And as a generous church, we understand that we are never done as long as there are persons who need to experience the love of Jesus Christ.
3. We are a church filled with opportunity for personal and spiritual growth to people of all ages from Noah's Ark pre-schoolers through to life-long Christians. We offer ways to feed the mind and spirit that we might grow more faithful in our lives together.
4. We are a church that continues to dream, to discern God's ever changing vision for us in an ever-changing world. We dream dreams that are too big for us, but with God all things are possible. Noah's Ark, VBS, Hispanic Ministry, vibrant mission from Butler to Honduras and beyond – just to name a few. And now we have a new dream – Wellspring – an evolving dream that is more than just doing a new service. As it comes into its own, it will be a ministry to persons who have felt isolated and separated from the church, those who are looking for answers and Jesus Christ provides the answers, youth and young adults who are hurting and at risk. Because we have done it before with God's help, we can do it again – not because we have everything in place already, but we trust that God will provide.
5. Why the Butler United Methodist Church? Because we are a church that will meet people where they are at and journey with them, because as United Methodists we have a commitment to allow people to think for themselves, to make decisions, to grow in their knowledge and love of God in various ways, to ask tough questions of the church and our faith without fearing God's wrath or judgment.

We have so much for which to be thankful in our church – much to lift up in gratitude for God's blessings. It is in our thankful response to the blessings that God has given us that we offer our commitments to support our mutual ministry. The blessing of giving is not in meeting a budget or financial goal. The blessing of giving is that together we are using gifts God has given us to bless others – fulfilling our call to be in ministry with joy and hope to a waiting world.