



Why, Church? (Are We So Institutionally Focused?)

Luke 13:10-17

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The season of Lent is a time to reflect and acknowledge the brokenness of the world. It's a time of preparation before the Easter celebration, a time at which we will worship with shouts of hallelujah for the new life God brings that provides healing and restoration amidst our brokenness. This year, our focus for Lent is to reflect on the brokenness of the Church using the question, "Why, Church?" Over the past two weeks, from Ash Wednesday to last Sunday, we have used this question to ponder the Church's self-obsession and its love of empirical power.

After Ash Wednesday's service, I had someone inquire about what I meant by "the Church." What is it that is broken? When we ask "Why, Church," to whom are we speaking? Many of us as children learned early on, the Church is not the building nor the steeple, when you open it up you find that the Church is the people. The question is a good question to ask, though, I'm not sure we'll like the answer.

When we ask the question, "Why, Church?" we are speaking first and foremost to those of us who make up the Church. It is not our buildings that yearn for power. It is not our sanctuaries that are self-obsessed. (Though, if there was a sanctuary to be self-obsessed, it would likely be ours. Can you image this sanctuary's infatuation if it saw itself in a mirror?) ... But seriously, the brokenness of the Church – that which needs healing and restoration – it is us. It is you and me. It is every elder and deacon across denominational lines. It is every Bishop and Cardinal who holds some form of ecclesial power. It is every lay member whose life is a witness and a reflection on the Church. It is every person who wears a crucifix around their neck, who wears John 3:16 on their eye-black, and who has a custom license plate or bumper sticker that references some scripture.

When we ask question, "Why, Church?", we are not speaking to some theoretical or mystical entity, we are reflecting on ourselves – perhaps first and foremost on our *corporate* identity, our shared witness, but in no means are we withholding the invitation to reflection from the individual. If each of us is healthy and whole than the whole of will be healthy and whole.

Today's question helps clarify how the individual and corporate are both implicated in this question, as we look more specifically at the question, "Why, Church, Are We So Institutionally Focused?"

A quick Google search offers that an *institution* is "a society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose." Given the intent of today's sermon, I am using the term institutional to refer to the hierarchical structures that comprise our shared witness of faith. It is as much an implication against denominational bodies such as the United Methodist Church, as it is our global and historical witness as a people called "the Church."

From an institutional perspective, the Christian Church is very loosely defined in three large groups: Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox. Yet, within these three large groupings, it is estimated that there are over 40,000 Christian denominations – institutions – across the globe, each having an unhealthy level of confidence that their branch of the Christian tree is the most faithful and theologically “correct.” Just within Methodism, a subset of the protestant grouping, there are about 20 “Methodist” denominations – the “United Methodists” being the largest. And, with the announcements that came this past week, it seems there will be one more Methodist denomination beginning on May 1, as the most conservative members of the United Methodist Church split to form their own new denomination.

I do know that the pain the Church has caused many is traumatizing. In that knowledge, I’m going to try and tread lightly as I give a few examples of how our toxic focus on the institution is a detriment to God’s creation. I have no desire to retraumatize anyone who has experienced this pain before. Yet, at the same time, I find it’s important to name some examples out loud because, in an attempt to protect the institution, the failures of the Church are often covered up and silenced. In trying to make the Church look like some “perfect example of God’s love,” we tend to hide the ugly side of institutional brokenness. But the Gospel says, to those who name their brokenness, they shall find new life.

Growing up, I attended a large Methodist church outside Atlanta. As a teenager, I found myself disenfranchised by the curriculum that was offered in the Sunday School classes. Every lesson felt predictable and forced. As a way to actually care about Sunday School and learning the Biblical text, a good friend of mine and I decided that, instead of going to the high school Sunday School class that was provided by the church, we would start our own class. We bought a Biblical concordance and a few other resources, and we would spend time each week prepping a conversation. Teenagers, taking time out of their normal weekly activities, to prep and plan Bible studies. I know, I’m odd ... but I was tired of getting nothing from Sunday School. On Sunday mornings we gathered, just about 4 or 5 of us, and we shared in a discussion around the text we had studied for the week.

Perhaps it was our teenage naivete, but we actually thought the Church would appreciate such initiative and desire by the youth of the church to go deeper than the stock curriculum provided. But no. When the Director of Christian Education found out that we had this Bible Study taking place, she called us to meet. She told us that we couldn’t keep gathering, at least, not without an adult present in the classroom. When we asked “Why?” ... Why can’t we meet without an adult? .. her response was disappointing. She said, and I remember it very clearly, “We have to make sure that what is being taught adheres to the Methodist doctrine.”

God forbid these students study the Scripture and come to a different understanding of God’s love and witness in the world than the Methodist Church might profess. We can’t have students in the church – who have grown up as baptized members of the church – having a different theological conviction than the denomination has historically maintained.

The Church, protecting its institutional identity at the expense of allowing individual discernment.

Now, one might protest that protecting Church doctrine and theological conviction is not necessarily a bad thing. We are a Christian Church that is built on 2000 years of history and tradition. And surely, as I stand and preach today, I preach from a conviction in Wesleyan Theology.

But the comment we received sounded a lot like, “We have to make sure that what is being done upholds the institution.” And that comment is toxic. That mindset is broken. And here is why:

One doesn't have to look far in the past of the Church to see how the church has sought to protect itself at the cost of the people in and around it. It is now public knowledge that the Catholic Church has investigated over 3,000 priests involved in sex abuse cases dating back to the 1950s – most of which were kept quiet until at least the year 2000. ... More recently, we are continuing to see the fall-out from the Boy Scout bankruptcy, where in many cases, churches were complicit in covering up child abuse dating back at least 70 years. ... And more personally, I know of a few situations in our own Virginia Conference where pastors were sexually involved with church members, at least one a member under the age of 18. The pastors were given the option: surrender your credentials and the abuse will remain a hushed affair, or refuse to surrender your credentials and this case will go under public investigation. In both cases, the pastor surrendered their credentials and the abuse never saw the light of day. There was no public acknowledgement of the harm done by the church. There was no repentance by the one who had abused their power. These, and the many more cases we haven't heard about, are little more than “the Church” doing what is best to protect the institution.

These situations of institutional protection aren't new in the life of the Church; such events are mere adaptations of a long history. Let's consider today's Scriptural text.

It was a Saturday, the Sabbath day for the Jewish people of Israel. Jesus was in the temple teaching, as he had been many times before. He was not the only Jewish leader in the synagogue that day, as we will soon find out.

As Jesus is there in the Synagogue, the religious equivalent of our Church building, a woman came in who had some form of physical ailment. The text says “she had a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up.”

We don't know her back story, but I can only imagine that over the past 18 years, this woman had come to the synagogue many times. We shouldn't assume this woman came looking to be healed, any more than we should assume Jesus showed up that day expecting to heal her. And yet, when Jesus sees her, he calls her over. He says to her, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then, he laid hands on her, and she stood up straight and began praising God.

When this woman comes in, Jesus does not engage in any form of theological conversation with her. He's not questioning whether or not she has paid her tithe, or if she has committed any sin. He's not checking to see if she has repented. It doesn't appear Jesus is in any way interested in her back story; Jesus sees she is in need, and responds by offering that which she needs – healing. What a beautiful statement about the purpose of the Church: to provide that which is needed for the people in the community, regardless their status, state, or demeanor.

Yet, Jesus wasn't the only teacher in the synagogue that day. Standing nearby was the leader of the synagogue. When he saw what Jesus had done, he became indignant and he was audibly teaching the crowd. Notice, he isn't speaking to Jesus or this woman; he is teaching the congregation, and will use this healing as fodder for his sermon.

The leader says, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

The Sabbath day was a day initiated by God in the laws given through Moses after the people had escaped slavery in Egypt. After many years of being forced to labor *every* day of the week, the Sabbath was a welcome change, which provided an intentional day of rest as it mandated there be no work. What it means "to work" is a fairly subjective term. I remember visiting Israel a little over 10 years ago, and I was surprised to find that they have Sabbath elevators. On the Sabbath day, the elevators are set in continuous motion, stopping at every floor on the way up and down. The intent of the Sabbath elevator is (in some locations) to allow there to be no elevator attendant, and (in other locations) to allow you to go from floor to floor without having to push a button because pushing a button is "work."

If one considers pushing an elevator button to be "work," it's not hard to understand why one would consider healing to be work. The leader of the synagogue is disgruntled at the healing that has taken place on the Sabbath. Yet, look closely at the language – he's not chastising Jesus for the *act* of healing. He's chastising the woman for coming to be healed on the Sabbath. Again he says, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; *come on those days to be cured, and not on the sabbath day.*" Should we gloss over the fact that she's been crippled by this spirit for 18 years, and she's never been offered healing by the leader of the synagogue before?

Fear not, Jesus won't let this snide comment go. While the leader of the synagogue chastised the woman in a public dialogue with the congregation, Jesus will respond directly to him. "The Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?'"

Like Jesus' teaching about the birds of the air being given what they need by God, Jesus is comparing a human life to the life of an animal. If God cares about the animals of creation, surely God cares that much more for humanity, which is made in the image of God!

What we see happening here is little more than the leader of the synagogue offering institutional protection. He has a narrowly defined understanding of the term "Sabbath," and uses his limited understanding in a way that is contrary to God's greater work of restoration and reconciliation. Pastor Janet James offers, "The leader of the synagogue has become more concerned with the letter of the law than with the purpose of the law." She continues, "If God's intention for the Sabbath is to provide healing rest and to assist the congregation to remember their freedom from Pharaoh through God's

activity in the exodus, then the synagogue leader has been negligent to make provision for this woman to receive what she needs.”ⁱ

This is the underlying corruption that we see anytime we place the institution over and above the work of God in the world. Too often we find good and upright people of faith, like the leader in the synagogue, exerting exorbitant amounts of energy trying to defend traditional doctrine and morality, and in doing so, as Theologian Justo Gonzalez says, we become “agents of overbearing pride, of prejudice, and of oppression.”

In this moment of healing on the Sabbath, and in his response to the leader of the synagogue, Jesus is pitting the institution against the work of God in the world. Don’t hear me wrong: I don’t think Jesus is saying the two can’t be harmonious; it is Jesus after all who gifted the Spirit for the creation of the Church. But anytime – and yes, I mean anytime – we defend the institution – its public identity, corporate nature, or even historical doctrine – at the expense of the health of humanity, we have sided with the leader of the synagogue, *whom Jesus chastises*.

And so have to ask, “Why, Church?” Why are we so focused on the institution? The scripture makes clear, the work of God in the world is not institutional. Yes, the Church is a gifted entity that is invited to participate in the work of God in the world – but the purpose of the Church is not to build a structure. The hope of the Church is not to make a name for itself. The goal of the Church is not to be the biggest, best, most affluent, flashiest, and best looking. As an institution, we exist for one reason and one reason only: to share in the work of God in this world. As a community, we have one purpose: we are *Making a Place for Everyone to Know God’s Love*.

So again, I ask, “Why, Church, are we so focused on the institution?” I pray Jesus’ witness and God’s word may lead us into greater faithfulness that we might be less focused on the powers of our corporate identity, and more intent on the need of the world to receive healing. For it doesn’t matter if our brokenness is 18-years of physical ailment, 2000-years of institutional upholding, or even 2-years of a pandemic, the world is in need of healing. May God lead us to share in the work of new life, true peace, and equitable justice for all, even if it means going against the institution. Amen.

ⁱ Janet James. *Feasting on the Gospel; Luke, Volume 2*. Eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis & E. Elizabeth Johnson. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.