

We are in a series of four sermons in which we are looking at our church. The observations that were used were taken from the feedback we received on the Conference on the Past as well as feedback on a survey that was given to Session, Deacons and PW leadership.

The first observation was Serving God or Serving Self. We come to church and church activities weary, rattled, and empty from hectic, out of balance lives. We come with little left to give. We are free to choose in every area of our lives, but what we fail to realize is that our choices then bind us. Often our choices block meaningful participation as the church. What is the solution? Decisions need to be made about priorities. What is most important in your life? What does God want, not what you want? Is serving God a priority? Is being with God a priority? Should church be a priority? Your answers will determine the church we will become.

The second observation. We live in a culture of self-centeredness, instant gratification and convenience. “What does it do for me?” shapes how we participate – or choose not to participate – in most activities, including the church. Our behavior often models the culture of self-centeredness, while our witness – to understand ourselves and live as God’s people called into community with and for one another – is silent. Also, we are living in a 24/7 world that is constantly bombarding us with messages about who we are, what should be important to us, and what we should be about. For good and for ill, we are being shaped by these messages. What kind of people does our consumer culture want us to be? What kind of people does Christ call us to be?

Today we look at the third observation. A very common notion of “church” today considers church as primarily a place where certain things happen; or as a vendor of religious goods and services designed to meet the individual’s self-defined needs. Each of these notions leads to limited expectations and unsatisfactory participation patterns, restricting the church’s vitality and witness. We begin to ask, “What is wrong with us?” Why can’t we be successful with youth, or children, or the church across town? The more important question may be, “What is wrong with this picture?” And the answer may be, ‘the future of our church depends on a more robust, focused, and shared understanding of the church as a body of people, called by God, and sent on God’s mission.’

The church 2,000 years ago had image problems. The focus on programs was what people needed to do. Do Gentiles become Jews? Do people eat certain foods? Since we are forgiven, can’t we do anything? Hey, its communion, Can’t we drink a lot of wine? Paul addresses this image problem, in Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:11-22

¹¹ So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands—¹² remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. ¹⁵ He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. ¹⁷ So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; ¹⁸ for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰ built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²² in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

We have an image problem. We want the church to look a certain way. We don’t want to change. Or we want to change what will affect others but not our self. We develop an inferiority

complex not measuring up to the perceived success of other churches. Programs need to improve as long as they don't change what I like. Or they can change what I don't like.

Paul says, "Don't serve the image." Serve God. You are now fellow-citizens with God's people and members of the family of God. ²⁰You, too, are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. ²¹He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord. ²²In union with him you too are being built together with all the others into a place where God lives through his Spirit.

It is interesting how the ways we talk about something can give insight into some of the assumptions and expectations that are operating in our behavior. It is very common to talk about, "going to church" or to ask "what church do you go to?" In a similar fashion we "go to the store," "go to the club," a football game, or the movies. We do not talk about "going to the family." In fact to use those words in connection with family sounds awkward and wrong. We *are* family, *and* we *are* church. At first this may seem to be merely a clever observation about our use of words. But it is more than that. The shift in choice of words from, "I go to church" to "we are the church" implies some very different ways of thinking and then behaving.

We have grown up with an understanding of the church as a building or place where certain things happened in a predictable fashion and at certain times. Participation in the life of the church involved going to that place and participating in certain activities. The dominant experience of church in today's culture is of a voluntary association, organized and run by a professional staff. The better the staff, the better the church.

While lay people may be involved in certain aspects, in most of our experience the primary responsibility for the ministry of the church has rested with the professionally trained. The problem is that such a division can overlook the giftedness of the whole community, stimulate passivity and dependence, and restrict the scope and power of the church's ministry. This has served to reinforce assumptions and patterns of participation that find us going to church to receive the services provided by the trained few. Paul says, "The church is called to be a Christian community where commitment, accountability, trust, openness, long-term relationships, and sacrifice are the standards that guide its life together.

When we lose this mindset, we become nervous about our success. And if we are not successful, we get better staff. Paul also addresses this in another letter. In 1 Corinthians 12:27-28, he writes that the Church needs everyone's gifts and talents to reach the unreached but God's church needs everyone to be involved, not just staff members, elders and deacons, but everyone.

This is why we need to move forward. We will take an honest examination of who we are and what we do. We will look at other churches and our community. We will look at our resources, both people and financial. And when we have a realistic idea, we will begin to form vision for our future. Not for the programs. But for how we serve God and not serve the image.