

Ezekiel 34:11-16 (NRSV)

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out.

¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.

Acts 2:41-47 (NRSV)

⁴¹So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. ⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

⁴³Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

God is the Good Shepherd, the one who protects, guides, and cares for his sheep. But who are his sheep? Where would we find them?

What is a church? Why go? Those are pretty basic questions and you'd surely get a wide variety of answers if you went out on the street and asked a bunch of people those two simple questions. Many people have had wonderful experiences with churches, but many have had just the opposite. Philip Yancey, the well-known Christian writer, talks straightforwardly about his own church upbringing and that he became a Christian despite it. On the jacket of his book, *Soul Survivor*, he writes, "I have spent most of my life in recovery from the Church." That's quite a statement from one of the most influential Christian writers of his generation. Given that Yancey speaks for far too many, including some who lost their faith entirely, let's take a look at those two basic questions.

What is a church?

First, a church is not a building. We may use the words that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on a mountaintop to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called "the Church."¹

There are many images of "the Church" in the Bible. It is we who are God's sheep, protected and cared for by the Good Shepherd. We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a "chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God's own people." And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

¹Please take a few minutes to read N. T. Wright's reflections on the church in the page three textbox. He says it all much better than I could. Wright is the Bishop of Durham in the Church of England and is a foremost New Testament scholar. He writes quite a lot for laypeople and is always worth reading. A good place to begin would be with his recent book, *Simply Christian*, from which the textbox passage was excerpted.

Why Go?

I sometimes get a question something like this: "I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can't I love Jesus just as well in my living room?" I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I'm not much of a joiner myself. And I'm pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that Bishop Wright writes, "it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself," for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God's creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church." To put it another way, we can't expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Good Shepherd

There are at least eight portraits of God in the Bible. Certainly, one of the most enduring is that of God as the Good Shepherd. This is picked up by Jesus, who refers to himself as the Good Shepherd in John 10. But this portrait is very much grounded in the Old Testament.

Throughout the ancient Near East, including Israel, the shepherd was a metaphor for the kings and their responsibilities to guide, protect, and care for their people. Ezekiel 34 opens with God's indictment of Israel's shepherds:

"Thus says the LORD God: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? . . . I am against the shepherds . . . I will rescue my sheep from their mouths . . ."

God will take over the shepherding of God's people:

"I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep . . . I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak . . ."

And how will God shepherd his people?

"I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them: I the LORD, have spoken."

Since David, son of Jesse and second king of the united Israel, had died centuries before Ezekiel, he cannot be who God has in mind as the servant who will shepherd God's people. Rather, this servant shepherd will come from David's royal line.

Thus, when Jesus says "I am the Good Shepherd," he is not only calling on the imagery of God as the Good Shepherd in Psalm 23, but also on the imagery from Ezekiel of the coming prince, the anointed one, the Messiah, who will shepherd the people as the young David once shepherded his flocks of sheep.

Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to have a Good Shepherd.

So, why go to church? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God's new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no church will meet all our expectations, nor will any church meet all of God's expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew almost ten years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we've been here ever since, in good times and bad. One son was baptized here, another married, and now we've gotten to share the baptism of our first grandchild with this wonderful congregation of Christians.

But even more important, it has been here that Patti and I have each found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used all these wonderful people, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters.

N. T. Wright on “Belonging to the Family”

Here, Bishop N. T. Wright gives us an informed and heartfelt description of the body of Christ, the Church, our family. This is excerpted from *Simply Christian*.

“If God is our father, the church is our mother.” The words are those of the Swiss Reformer John Calvin. Several biblical passages speak in this way (notably, Galatians 4:26-27, echoing Isaiah 54:1).

They underline the fact that it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself. The church is first and foremost a *community*, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God, the God we know in and through Jesus. Though we often use the word “church” to denote a building, the point is that it’s the building *where this community meets*. True, buildings can and do carry memories, and when people have been praying and worshipping and mourning and celebrating in a particular building for many years, the building itself may come to speak powerfully of God’s welcoming presence. But it is the *people* who matter.

The church exists primarily for two closely correlated purposes: to worship God and to work for his kingdom in the world. You can and must worship, and work for God’s kingdom, in private and in ways unique to yourself, but if God’s kingdom is to go forward, rather than around and around in circles, we must work together as well as apart.

The church also exists for a third purpose, which serves the other two: to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as *fellowship*. This doesn’t just mean serving one another cups of tea and coffee. It’s all about living within that sense of a joint enterprise, a family business, in which everyone has a proper share and a proper place.

It is within this context that the different “ministries” within the church have grown up. From the very earliest evidence we have, in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, the church has recognized different callings within its common life. God has given different gifts to different people so that the whole community may flourish and take forward the work with which it has been entrusted.

Worship, fellowship, and the work of reflecting God’s kingdom into the world flow into and out of one another. You can’t reflect God’s image without returning to worship to keep the reflection fresh and authentic. In the same way, worship sustains and nourishes fellowship; without it, fellowship quickly deteriorates into groups of the like-minded, which in turn quickly become exclusive cliques—the very opposite of what Jesus’s people should be aiming at.

It is within the church, even when the church isn’t getting everything quite right, that the Christian faith of which we have spoken is nourished and grows to maturity. As with any family, the members discover who they are in relationship with one another. Churches vary enormously in size, from scattered handfuls of people in isolated villages to enormous congregations of many thousands in some parts of the world. But ideally every Christian should belong to a group that is small enough for individuals to get to know and care for each other, and particularly to pray in meaningful depth for one another, and also to a fellowship large enough to contain a wide variety in its membership, styles of worship, and kingdom-activity. The smaller the local community, the more important it is to be powerfully linked to a larger unit. The larger the regular gathering (I think of those churches where several hundred, or even several thousand, meet together every week), the more important it is for each member to belong also to a smaller group. Ideally, groups of a dozen or so will meet to pray, study scripture, and build one another up in the faith.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Monday, Acts 4:23-31 The believers in Jerusalem pray for boldness in the face of threats.

Tuesday, Acts 5:1-11 The disturbing story of Ananias and Sapphira. Be sure you notice that their offense was lying about their contribution, not failing to sell all they had.

Wednesday, Acts 6:1-7 The apostles are overwhelmed with the work of the community and decide to reorganize!

Thursday, John 10:1-18 Jesus is the good shepherd who will give his life for his flock.

Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 The body of Christ, the Church, is to be unified.

Saturday, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 The body of Christ is one, but has many members.

Sermon Notes

Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations

The current series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall. This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

Today: *Vatican II and today's Roman Catholic Church*

Next Week: *Pentecostalism and Christianity's Future*

Coming in Advent (begin Nov. 30) – A Candid History of Christmas

All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Who wants to be your good shepherd? There are always lots of folks lobbying for the job. Who tells you that they want to protect and provide for you? To show you the way to the life you've always wanted? You might share some stories of times in your life when a seeming "good shepherd" let you down, when you discovered that the shepherd wasn't as good as you thought or as able.
2. In what ways do these false shepherds (wolves dressed in shepherd's clothing?) fail us? Why do we find it so easy to invest our trust and our hopes somewhere other than in God? I'm reminded of the time the Israelites demanded a human king, just like all the peoples around them. The prophet Samuel reminded them that God was to be their king, but the Israelites would not relent. Samuel warned them that they better be careful what they wished for, as kings are inclined to thievery, mischief, and worse. But the people wanted a king (a good shepherd!) and so God gave them one. Of course, the shepherds of Israel turned out to be wolves themselves (read all of Ezekiel 34).
3. Today's Scripture passage from Acts is a good opportunity to use our imaginations. Try making two lists. Label them "Jerusalem church" and "St. Andrew." List out what you see as some similarities and differences between the two communities. What might we learn from them? What might they learn from us? I'm guessing that the latter will be more difficult for you. You might even take the passage from Acts and go through it phrase by phrase looking for similarities and differences.
4. What do you make of the statement "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?" Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? We don't call one another "brother" and "sister" at St. Andrew although some Christians do. Why brothers and sisters? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).