

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“A Sacred Body”
6th in the series *Church Matters*
Mark 1:14-15; 1 Cor. 12:12-27
September 6 2015

This is our last Sunday on this series of “Church Matters,” and there’s something that we haven’t acknowledged yet that needs to be recognized: Jesus never preached a sermon on why the church matters. In fact, he didn’t say much about church at all. What he does seem to always be talking about is the Kingdom of God.

The gospel of **Mark puts it up front and center so we won’t miss it. This is what Jesus preached, “The Kingdom of God is at hand...”** And if you read through the rest of Mark, or the other gospels, it’s hard to miss.

It’s the one thing he’s always talking about.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It’s so small you might miss it. But when it’s full-grown its branches are strong enough to make a home for the birds.

The Kingdom of God is like seeds that are planted... and in some mysterious way, they sprout and grow, even though we don’t understand it.

The Kingdom is like a buried treasure, like a feast, like a wedding banquet, like a net that catches an abundance of fish... On and on he goes, always talking about the kingdom.

“It’s at hand,” he says. “It’s hidden. It’s within you. It’s beyond you. It is now and is still coming.”

It’s wheat growing among the weeds.

It’s yeast working it’s magic through the dough.

It’s so very easy to miss, so pay attention!

he warns us.

If you want to find it, then he teaches us to go look among the peacemakers, the poor, the merciful, those who hunger and thirst for God.

You can find it advancing,

not by power and might,

not by one nation or another,

but by acts of grace and mercy, of peace and humility and hospitality.

This is what Jesus is always talking about. **“He came preaching the good news of the kingdom.”** He speaks about it more than 100 times in the gospels...but the church... he only mentions twice.

It's a little unsettling the first time someone points that out, especially when you're preaching a series on why church matters! In fact, one common reaction is to throw the whole church thing out the door.

“Jesus didn’t talk about it. I don’t need it. I’d rather be a kingdom citizen than a church member.”

Truth be told, I would too. Whenever the two are in conflict... I hope we all have the courage to choose the Kingdom over the church. But most of the time, it's not so black and white.

Any astute reader of the New Testament will notice that as soon as you turn the page to Acts, and especially the epistles, things are flipped on their heads.

Jesus talked about the kingdom, and hardly mentions the church.

The rest of the New Testament references the church hundreds of times, and barely mentions the Kingdom.

I like the way Wilhelm Dilthey puts it. **“Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, but what appeared was the church.”** Sometimes, that can feel like a bit of a bait and switch!

But here's what's happening. The first generation of the church is less concerned about announcing the Kingdom... and more concerned about how to live it out. So when you read their letters, you start to get a glimpse of what it was like for that first generation of Jesus's followers to try to apply his teachings to their everyday lives... to their specific circumstances.

And when you realize that's what the letters are about, this picture begins to emerge of these messy, wild, beautiful, *ekklesias*, in the original Greek, or what we call Church. *Ecclesia* is the Greek word we translate for church. But in Jesus' time it had a much broader meaning. It was a word that was used to refer to a gathering of people, or, a “calling out” of citizens for a civic meeting, or for a battle.

So, the New Testament writers begin to use this word, this *ekklesia* idea, to describe their gatherings.... because the church is essentially a called-out gathering of Kingdom citizens.

As one writer puts it, **“citizens, called out –from their individuality from their sins, from their old ways of doing things, from the world’s way of doing things, into participation in this new kingdom and community with one another.”**¹ The *ekklesia*.

So, no, the church, the *ekklesia*, is not the same as the kingdom, but it is the place where the kingdom rubber hits the road, so to speak. Together we work out this Kingdom reality that Jesus preached. Together we *embody* something that Jesus also *embodied*.

¹ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching For Sunday*, 255.

And so a metaphor begins to develop in these letters: ***You are the body of Christ. You are the body the One who was the embodiment of the Kingdom. “You are the body of Christ, and each individual one of you is a part of it.”*** 1 Corinthians says.

Now that might seem like a mysterious thing to say to a group of people that had more flaws on just their little toe than Jesus had in his whole being. Truth be told, when I think about the history and life of the church, I’m not exactly sure how this all works out.... that we are the body of Christ.... except that it must mean I can’t be a Christian on my own. As one teacher puts it, **“Like it or not, following Jesus is a group activity, something we’re supposed to do together.”**²

Maybe.... more than anything, ***that’s why the Church matters so much.*** We’re just not going to be able to do this on our own. The only way to work out this Kingdom business that Jesus talked about, is to work it out together.... as one body with so many different parts.... as one body beautiful, broken, and flawed.

A few weeks ago I was challenged to do some fresh imagining about what it means for us to be called ***the body***... or even the ***body and bride of Christ***. The church has had centuries of men reflecting on this, but then I came across a woman’s reflection on what this might mean. By now you’ve heard me quote Rachel Held Evens a number of times during this series. Her newest book *Searching for Sunday* is part of what provoked me to preach this series.

Today I want to share with you her what she has to say as a woman, about what it means for Church to be this sacred body. This is what she writes:

What might a woman say about the church as body and bride?

Perhaps she would speak of the way a regular body moves through the world—always changing, never perfect—capable of nurturing life, not simply through the womb, but through hands, feet, eyes, voice, and brain. Every part is sacred. Every part has a function.

Perhaps she would speak of impossible expectations and all the time she’s wasted trying to contort herself into the shape of those amorphous silhouettes that flit from magazines and billboards into her mind.

Perhaps she would speak of the surprise of seeing herself—flaws and all—in the mirror on her wedding day.

Or of the reality that with new life comes... dry heaves, dirty diapers, snotty noses, late-night arguments, and a whole army of new dangers and fears she never even considered before because life-giving isn’t nearly as glamorous as it sounds, but it’s a thousand times more beautiful.

² Rachel Held Evens.

Perhaps she would talk about being underestimated, about surprising people and surprising herself. Or about how there are moments when her own strength startles her, and moments when her weakness—her forgetfulness, her fear, her exhaustion—unnerves her.

Or maybe she would explain how none of the categories created for her, sum her up, or capture her essence.

And then she says that If the church is like a body, like a bride, then we ought to take her though what Barbara Brown Taylor calls the ‘spiritual practice of wearing skin’ ... which she describes by saying,

*Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular, there comes a time when it is vitally important to you spiritual health to drop your clothes, look in the mirror, and say, **“Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address”***

After you have taken a good look around, you may decide that there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. Bodies take real beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning.³

“When I do this,” Barbra Brown Taylor says, “I generally decide that it is time to do a better job of wearing my skin with gratitude instead of loathing.”

And so Rachel Held Evens invites us to turn the mirror on this Sacred Body:

This is the church. Here she is. Lovely, irregular, sometimes sick and sometimes well. This is the body-like no other that God has shaped and placed in the world. Jesus lives here; this is his soul’s address.

There is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. She has taken a beating, the church. Every day she meets the gates of hell and she prevails. Every day she serves, stumbles, injures, and repairs.

That she has healed is an underrated miracle. That she gives birth is beyond reckoning.

Maybe it’s time to make peace with her.

Maybe it’s time to embrace her, flawed as she is.⁴

³ Barbra Brown Taylor, *An Alter in the World*, 38, quoted in Evens, 250.

⁴ Rachel Held Evens, *Searching for Sunday*, 248-250.

As we draw this series to a close, maybe it's time to look again in the mirror, and smile back... giving thanks for this magnificent and flawed, sacred body that has carried us countless times into the arms of Christ.

She is the one that gives us a **sacred rhythm**, week after week, gathering us together, always calling us back to our true home in God.

She is the one that invites us all to **the Sacred Meal**. She feeds our souls, and offers us the hospitality of God.

She forms us into a **Sacred Community**, where we share our lives and practice the love of Christ with each other.

Again and again, she picks us up, puts us on her lap to tell us the old, old story of resurrection, **the sacred story** we have been entrusted with... and then she pats us on the rear the way my grandmother used to, and send us out to go and practice resurrection.

The church is **the Sacred Body** and Bride of Christ... beautiful, blessed, broken and flawed. It is wildly lovely.

It has been given to you, and to the world.

Prayer:

And so God, we give you thanks for the church, in all her many forms, struggling to embody your kingdom. We give you thanks for each particular church that we have been part of along the way... small churches and large churches... churches of every flavor and denomination.

For the churches in our own life that taught us and nurtured us, for churches that challenged us and called us, for churches past and present, we are deeply grateful.

And we give you thanks for this particular church. For this community of people. For the gift this place has been in our lives.

Grant us wisdom and grace as we seek to embody your kingdom in our world... And grant us the courage to invite others to be part of this blessed and beautiful community.

We ask these things in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying, Our Father