

The Church Has Left the Building!

The gospel according to John: ¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." *The gospel of the Lord.*

Dear hearers of God's Word, grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Elvis has left the building!"

This phrase was announced at the end of Elvis Presley's concerts to encourage fans to accept that there would be no further encores and to go home. Al Dvorin was the regular stage announcer for Elvis during the 1970s and he would say, "Ladies and gentlemen, Elvis has left the building. Thank you and goodnight."

Oddly, the first time it was used was to encourage the audience to *remain* in their seats. On December 15, 1956, Horace Logan was the announcer at the Louisiana Hayride show in which Elvis was a regular performer. Presley appeared in the list of performers rather early in the lineup, and as he became more popular with teenagers, they would attend the show until Elvis had done his set and then go home, so the original announcement by Mr. Logan was this: "Please, young people – Elvis has left the building. He has gotten in his car and driven away – please, take your seats."

Later the original words were reshaped and used to get people to *leave* the auditorium once it was clear that Elvis wasn't going to sing any more songs.

"Elvis has left the building!"

It was the evening of the very first Easter, and the disciples were huddling behind locked doors. They were afraid for it had not gone well for their teacher, and they hoped the deadbolt would prevent an arrest and crucifixion that might be in the offing for them as well. Their entire world had been turned upside down. At this point in John's account, Mary Magdalene is the only one who had actually seen the risen Lord, thinking him to be the gardener, recognizing Jesus only when he spoke her name.

Suddenly, there he was . . . standing among the frightened disciples.

Notice what is jam-packed into just five short verses:

1. "Peace be with you," Jesus declared, granting the shalom of God that brings security and well-being.
2. He showed them his wounds and then he declared shalom upon them a second time, because you can never get too much of the Lord's peace.
3. He breathed on them, like the wind God blew into the nostrils of the figure he fashioned

from the mud of the ground, the life-giving breath of God, making the disciples come alive from the deadness of their souls. As Marty Stortz said at a meeting I was at on Wednesday: “I wonder what post-resurrection breath smells like?” I’d guess the resurrected Jesus didn’t need a tic-tac!

4. He gave them authority, the very authority of God to declare and retain the forgiveness of sins through the crucified and risen Christ.
5. And finally, Jesus sent them into the world – “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Grounded in peace, filled with the wind of God, empowered with authority, and sent.

Welcome to the church then and now.

Grounded in peace, filled with the wind of God, empowered with authority, and sent.

This church, this body whom Christ has made us to be, cannot live behind locked doors, cannot hunker down to protect itself, cannot be gripped by fear just because the world seems to be coming apart.

This church, we who are called forth from the water and Word of baptism, is a sent church.

Sent: **“The church has left the building!”**

We gather around Word and Sacrament to experience the shalom of God,

We are steeped in the Spirit, the wind of God blows in and through us,

We are handed the keys to the kingdom so that forgiveness is always a part of who we are and what we do.

All for the purpose of being sent . . . nourished, Spirit-filled, authorized . . . all for God’s purpose of being sent. “The church has left the building!”

It’s no accident that the missional discernment tool that I mentioned this morning is called “Beyond Our Doors.” It is a guide that will hopefully help congregations see themselves as a sent church and discern just where God might be sending them.

Truthfully, it is not easy to be a sent church. It is a whole lot easier –

to stay firmly put, rather than venture away from what is familiar and safe,

to see the church as a bulwark against a change, rather than using change as opportunity,

to retreat from the world, rather than engage it,

to become more and more focused upon preservation of what used to be, rather than what could be.

It’s hard, it means losing your life to find it; it means seeing the face of Jesus in the one you despise the most; it means that the last shall be first and the first shall be last; it means dying to self and rising in the Lord to live for the other.

It’s hard. To paraphrase Jesus, “If you would follow me, you’d better look good on wood.”

And where does Jesus bid us to follow? Into the cross roads – that’s where we are sent.

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

“The church has left the building.”

It’s a messy thing to be sent . . .

because you’re going to rub shoulders with those ignored by everyone else,

because you're going to bump your head against power and structures that keep the lowly low
and the high and lofty, rich and mighty,
because you *are* going to experience conflict and strife because you will be complicit in the
Gospel equivalent of rocking the boat.
Yes, it is a messy thing to be sent . . .

As excited as I am about the new Latino ministry in our synod, I am fully aware that deep
prejudice will raise its ugly head. I know that some will insist that we take care of our own first,
before we pay attention to those we do not know. By necessity, we will talk about immigration
reform and how it affects our neighbor. Some won't like it, not one bit.
I know that to be a sent church is messy.

But I wouldn't have it any other way. For it is Jesus who touched the leper, challenged
the powerful on both the religious and political fronts, and embraced the outcast. Yes, it is
messy; just look to the one who bled and suffered for you and me – crucifixion messy.

Jesus was *sent* . . . for the salvation of the world which God loves.
We are sent . . . sent into this same world for which Jesus died and rose – For God *so loved* the
world.

Because of the office I hold, I get some pretty strange letters and emails. A favorite of mine was
a letter mailed to me last February, and I knew it was going to be “one of those” with one glance
at the name and return address. The letter was from: “Paul Revere, 1776 Patriot Way, Boston,
MA.”

Here's how it starts out: “Dear Bishop Pederson, I am writing to you because you are
one of the most powerful and influential leaders for God in America and we want your help.” (I
regularly read that single sentence to my staff.) ☺

And then the letter spells out exactly what kind of help the writer wants:

- to fight against the satanic evil that is Islam
- to urge others to stop voting for Muslims for political office
- to insist that “Islam is against the law in America”
- and to write Congress and demand that all mosques be demolished in America now and all
who hold the Muslim faith be deported from the U.S. by July 4, 2012.

The writer is confident that I will give leadership to a Christian and Jewish coalition who
will accomplish these worthy God and country goals.

As “one of the most powerful and influential leaders for God in America,” I wonder how we as
disciples of Jesus can be sent into such a world with all its pride and brokenness? How can we
love our enemies, care for the stranger, deal with hatred, and advocate for peace . . . when *this* is
the world into which we are sent? When *we* are also part of this prideful, broken world?

How can we possibly do this? How can we be, “The church that has left the building?”

It's because God has already made us to be a sent people and God has given us everything
we need – peace, Spirit, authority. Just as he took frightened disciples and transformed the world
through them, so too we are sent to continue this holy transformative work. And, we *do* have
everything we need to be a sent church: Jesus has granted us shalom, he has breathed his Spirit
upon his, he has granted us authority in his name, and he has sent us, just as the Father sent him.

It helps me to remember this:

It is the One who showed his hands and side—the crucified, risen Christ— it is the One who showed his hands and side who grants peace, who empowers for ministry, and who sends us out into the world.

We witness and serve, clergy and lay,
 not because we are so gifted,
 not because we are so faithful,
 not because we are so good . . .
 but because Jesus is gift,
 because Jesus is faithful,
 because Jesus is good . . .

Because if left to our own devices,
 we'd still see the gardener instead of the Lord,
 we'd still be lifeless if the Lord hadn't breathed the Spirit upon us,
 and we'd still be hiding behind locked doors to protect our own little turf, had not the
 Lord foiled our deadbolts and sent us into the rough and tumble of life.

This whole business of witness and service, faith and life, and empowering and sending is the Lord's doing, the Lord of pierced side and holes in hands, the Lord who died and rose for you and me and all creation. *All of this is the Lord's doing!*

“The church *has* left the building!”

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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