

*Ekklesia: Becoming the Community of God*

We are starting a new series today entitled *Ekklesia: Becoming the Community of God*. Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." For centuries this has been an apt description of the church—a community that knows the truth and, in turn, is made odd. Our cultural landscape has undergone significant and dramatic changes between the current pandemic and heightened cultural polarization. We are in a new world, and the opportunity for the church to be the odd church is now.

But why? What is it about our current cultural moment that causes us to be odd as those who proclaim truth? What has shifted in our world where truth becomes odd? We live firmly in what sociologists call a post-Christian world. This is obviously in contrast to a Christian or pre-Christian world.

There are many implications for what we mean by this, but ultimately, it cannot be argued that the influence of Christianity in the West has significantly declined. First, church engagement; each successive generation is becoming less religious and less Christian. Church attendance has continued to wane. What used to be the cultural majority is now a fringe minority. Second, perception; religion is no longer seen as a social good. In fact, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. Religion is seen as something to be entirely avoided in the public square, an obstacle to social progress.

How does this affect our mission? How does this impact how we go about being the church? What if this became one of the church's great moments? What if we were able to find a way not just to survive but to do some of our most creative work?

### **Ten-Year Vision**

Almost four years ago, the Elders presented to CPC a ten-year vision to respond to the many challenges we face as a church in this particular moment and context. The vision they laid out was:

In the next ten years, CPC will engage in spiritual formation at a magnitude that will propel us into thoughtful and gracious cultural engagement on the San Francisco Peninsula to ignite both personal and societal transformation.

Out of this vision, we laid out four pillars that would enable us to make strides toward this vision. These four pillars are Worship, Spiritual Formation, Equipping, and Cultural Engagement. Over the past four years, we have made strides in each of these. We focused on cultivating a depth in our worship experiences, we deepened our community groups, and introduced more formation across our ministries, we reevaluated the manner that we are raising up leaders in our communities to serve

both inside and outside the walls of the church, and we sought to meet the needs of our community during a year of unprecedented challenge.

These Four Pillars have and will continue to be the work laid out for us as a community. We still deeply believe this is the work God has called us to in the next few years. And so today, we start a four-week series that will take a fresh look at this vision.

What does it mean for the church, the community of God, to be a transformed people transforming the Peninsula? We believe that very simply, it means to be the church. To lean into our "oddness" to lean further into our identity as the community of God. And then, as we do so, we live as an alternative community of God that stands in contrast to the world around us.

This is what it has always meant to be the church and the community of God. If you trace the gathering of the people of God throughout the scriptures, you will find God is consistently calling his people out of the systems and ways of the world to be a distinct and alternative community among the nations. This is what it means to be church.

The Greek word for church is the word *Ekklesia* (*Ek* = Out of, *klesia* - *Kaleo* = To Call, *Ek*(out of) *klesia*[called]). The word is comprised of two Greek words. When you put these two together, you get the idea of "the called-out ones." At an etymological level, to be the church is to be the "called out ones." A collection of people that have been called out from the world and made into a distinct community built on alternative principles and alternative modes of operation from the church.

As you trace the story of God's people throughout the scriptures, you will see this theme throughout the Bible. Even though the Old Testament does not have the term church, which comes later in the New Testament, the idea of the people of God being "called out" from among the nations is the consistent theme. God had continually led his people as a distinct alternative. They were called to live in such a manner that contrasted with the world around them. And every time the people would drift away, God, primarily through the prophets, would course correct the people by calling out their failures. Several times the people of God resisted to follow the alternative way, which resulted in God sending them into exile. A place where they experienced the pain of their failure and disobedience.

So the question is, how do we exist as a "called out people" within the dominant structures of the world that are perpetually seeking to pull us toward their ideology, whether it is pressure from the right or the left? How do we maintain our distinction as the *Ekklesia* of God? How do we exist as a minority culture within a dominant culture that is increasingly rejecting the idea of God? But the problem of our oddness, the problem of how we live faithfully alternative to the way of the world right in the

midst of a majority culture that is not like our own, has always been a challenge. I want to address three postures that we must avoid in taking up our distinction as the *Ekklesia* of God.

The first is isolation. The idea is that if we can hide away into our private enclave, escaping from the trappings of the world, then we can be safe and allow the world to pass us by without having to engage in the world. This can look like a lot of different ways. I often think of some expression of faith in the Amish community or even those in the Monastic traditions—beautiful followers of Jesus, who have created a way of life that takes the commands seriously to follow Jesus, but their cultural influence is largely zero because they are isolated away from the world.

It can result in the Christian subculture that produces Christian dentists, coffee shops, etc. Not a bad impetus, but it isolates us from the world that we have been called to love and bear witness to of the Kingdom of God. It's when all of your friends and interactions are solely with Christians, and you no longer have any touchpoint with non-Christians.

This can also find expression in fundamentalist traditions that attempts to legislate away anything that isn't in the way of Jesus, without regard for the transformative work of the spirit. Again, the impetus is good, but the problem results in the inability to engage and be with our neighbors. This actually creates a chasm for the time when we re-emerge to relate and live in the world. It is a turtle posture where we hide in our shells and occasionally pop our heads out and see if it is okay before retreating away again.

The second attempted solution is that of assimilation. The idea here is that we have to simply blend into the culture around us to gain credibility and then sneak the gospel in the back door. The goal is to blend in, go with the flow and simply disappear in plain sight. Again, the impetus is that we would be able to relate well to the culture so we can preach the gospel. But what happens within the sway of the secular west is as one seeks to blend in, they get swept away from the way of Jesus and begin to fall away from the faith.

What started as seeking to assimilate and blend in with the culture to disciple the world results in the world discipling the once follower of Jesus in political and cultural ideology and immersive consumerism, ultimately leading to a disintegration of faith. No longer identifiable in juxtaposition to the world around us. We underestimate the persuasive sway of the digital world and its ability to disciple us away from Jesus, ultimately succumbing to the formative power of secularism. The failure of assimilation is the loss of the way of Jesus. We lose our distinction as the "called out ones." This is called a chameleon posture, which adapts to whatever new wind of thinking and living is with a Christian veneer on the top of it.

Lastly, the third attempted solution is the problem of accommodation. This results in the distortion of the gospel. The focus here is less active and more passive. It is the failure in aligning ourselves more with right-wing or left-wing ideologies as each fails in the way of Jesus. It imposes cultural categories onto the gospel rather than allowing the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to precede and filter any engagement with culture. We accommodate the means of the world to try and accomplish the

goals of the Kingdom of God. But latent within the means of the world ("power-over") are the goals of the world.

Ultimately, the Kingdom of God is something that transcends cultural categories, and any attempt to align them with the gospel distorts it into something it is not. If one does this, it results in its loss of allegiance to the cruciform way of Jesus and allows the world to dictate how we live and seek transformation. So again, I return to the question I posed a few minutes ago. How do we exist as the *Ekklesia* of God without succumbing to these temptations and remain a distinct community of the gospel?

## The Motif of Exile

I want to suggest that the posture we take up within our current cultural moment is the church's posture in exile. Running throughout the entire scriptures, from the opening pages in Genesis through the New Testament, the metaphor exile is used to describe this very situation. And throughout the history of the church it shows how not only to exist but actually thrive within exile. Through much of the New Testament letters, particularly Peter's, there is a rich history that we look back upon and draw wisdom from in trying to exist faithfully as God's *Ekklesia*.

The exilic literature throughout the Old Testament scriptures gives witness to this—Daniel, which we will be looking at next spring, Esther, and Nehemiah. There is one particular passage that I want to look at today in the book of Jeremiah. When the elders launched this new vision a few years ago, Mark preached this same passage, and I think it is so poignant that we need to look again at it. Let's read the first two verses from chapter 29 to help set the context.

**This is the text of the letter that the Prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the surviving elders among the exiles and the priests, the prophets and all the other people Nebuchadnezzar had carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Jer. 29:1-2**

The setting is a letter that is written to those who had been sent to exile. The recipients were the Israelites who had been taken captive by the Babylonians after they defeated Israel. This was a swift defeat that included the destruction of Solomon's Temple. The temple was the central symbol of their nation and the sign that God was present with them. The devastation of exile is hard to wrap our heads around. It was the captivity of them being dragged away from their homes, faith, family land, everything, and then forced to live in a foreign land. It was both demoralizing and dehumanizing. Their entire world was pulled out from underneath them. And remember, for the Old Testament people of God, the destruction of the temple meant the destruction of the only place they felt they could connect with God.

They experienced the world shift right around them—uncertainty, turmoil, confusion, disbelief, political fallout, all of it. That is where we get Psalm 137. It is a deep lament about the fall of Jerusalem. It left them questioning, "*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion...How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?*" (Ps. 137:1, 4). The question the Psalmist poses here is the same question we

ask now? How do we live faithful to the way of Jesus in a land that has drastically changed? How do we live in exile?

The two initial responses to living in exile are lament and outrage. You see both of these present in the Psalm in 137. You see the deep sadness and lament for the loss of what once was. And you see the outrage built from the belief that something was stolen from them. And while these emotions may be genuine and okay to experience for a time, they are no place in which to live. They are no posture in which to exist and thrive. These postures are unsustainable and frankly erode the church and the community in which we find ourselves. Put more simply, at some point; we have to move on and consider what life looks like in the new era. With that context in mind, let's read on into the letter and see what God writes for the exiles:

**This is what the Lord Almighty the God of Israel, says to all those carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease." vv. 4-6**

The first instruction given by God to the exiles is twofold: Settle down and be faithful in the ordinary. Consider the first list of commands: Build houses and settle down. Plant gardens and eat. Marry and have kids. Have grandkids. The exiles were going to be there a while. The idea was not to just build but settle down. They were not to just plant gardens but to "eat what they produce." The first hurdle for the exiles was to accept their fate in exile and begin to be faithful in the ordinary way of life. By necessity, they had to move on from the lament and the rage. And learn to live in a new space.

One of the convictions that Lindsey and I have held when moving to the Bay Area over six years ago was at the most basic level the Bay Area needs Christians living here. That's it. Just Christians faithfully following Jesus, attending to the ordinary things of life, and doing so in a manner that exemplifies an alternative manner of living.

This doesn't mean this is the only thing we do, but it is the most basic. We build houses; we plant gardens; we build families. We root ourselves in this place. It may be that not all of us are meant to be in the Bay Area, and that is fine. But as Christians, the calling of place and where we are supposed to live has to be a part of the discussion and consideration. How do you view your ordinary life as wrapped up in the mission of God? How do you consider location and place as part of God's calling on whatever career path you are on?

Many times, we get stuck thinking that God only moves in the big things. But it is in the ordinary day-in-day-out living that we find God's work taking root. In this way, we attend to the ordinariness with a vision of how God may be working. We take care of our children. We teach preschool. We do our jobs well, whatever it may be. We faithfully contribute to the larger society. Shop, live, be neighborly, all with the vision that we operate from a different worldview that moves us toward a distinct way of living. Church, be faithful in the ordinary.

So the first instruction is for them to settle down and be faithful in the ordinary. The second advice the Prophet gives to the exiles is, *"Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper"* (v. 7). While the first section of the letter is meant to spur them on toward faithfulness in the ordinary, the second instructs them not to remain apathetically unengaged but to contribute to the city they find themselves in but doing so in a manner different than the world.

"Seek the peace and prosperity of the city..." The word for "peace and prosperity" is actually one word, arguably the most important term in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, the word is shalom. The idea is that of peace, but that word is convoluted in our world. When we think of the word peace, most of us think predominately of "the absence of conflict." In this way, we think in passive terms, something that isn't. But the concept of shalom is far more active. It is the idea of wholeness, completeness, and thriving. It is the absence of strife, but it is also the presence of goodness and wholeness. Maybe the best metaphor for shalom is that of harmony.

Consider the symphony. I remember going to see the San Francisco Symphony a few years back. Lindsey and I arrived early at the Davies Symphony Hall off Van Ness. And as we were sitting there in our seats, the musicians began to file in and prep their instruments. They were each tuning, prepping, and practicing all at once. After a few minutes, the noise was chaotic. Each musician was doing their own thing, noise, chaos, and confusion. This is the absence of shalom. Nothing working together, musician after musician competing for one another with no regard for the others.

But then the conductor walked out, and with a wave of the baton, they all stopped. And in unison, they begin tuning their instruments to one another. And what was once chaos was now turning to rhythm, harmony, and wholeness as the orchestra created shalom with one another. There was an absence of conflict, but there was also a contribution to the wholeness of the orchestra, and the result was stunningly beautiful. This is shalom. Each member of the orchestra is working to bring about the fullness of the others. And what results is rhythm, harmony, and beauty.

So Jeremiah says, "Seek the shalom of the city." If they were to seek the shalom of the city, the fundamental posture would be one of looking outward, beyond their own lives and toward the city around them. They were to be faithful to the way of God and flourish in that, even while they were exiled. So much so that God notes that the success of the people of God was tied to the success of the city they found themselves in.

So what does it mean for us to "seek the shalom of the city?" I think it can mean many things. First, contribute to the common good. It builds off of the initial advice of being faithful in the ordinary. As we exist as the community of God in exile, it first means that we are to use our skill-sets, vocations, callings, all to serve the wider community. This doesn't mean just doing work that we have generally call ministry, but it is a

broadening of the definition of ministry to include contributing to the common good.

For the preschool teacher, this means building a classroom culture that fosters care and love for children. For the software engineer, this can mean developing systems and structures that promote the common good. For the banker, this can mean facilitating equitable practices that enable all to flourish. For the stay-at-home mom, this means bringing up the children in their care with discipleship and care.

Second, pray for the city. Seek its good, petition on behalf of God to the city. The prophet recognizes that the people of God are so embedded in the world that their two fates are intertwined. And God instructs them to pray for the city because if the city succeeds, they too will succeed.

Now, remember, this is a radical command. The city they are instructed to pray for is the same city that dragged the people of God from their homeland, destroyed their land, ruined their heritage. All of it. They were very much the enemies of the people of God, and the instruction is not to rebel against it, not to try and fuel wars against it but to pray for it, to seek its good. This letter provides a framework for how to exist within exile. It gives shape to the worldview of so many of the people of God before us.

Listen to how the author and scholar Duane Friesen talks about the posture we, as the alternative community of God, should have during exile.

**Jeremiah's timely advice is his letter admonishes the exiles not to pout, not to yearn for a lost golden age, and not to rage against their enemies. Instead, he urges them to take responsibility for the city in which they live. In his words, 'seek the welfare [shalom or peace] of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare [shalom] you will find your welfare [shalom].'**

What would it look like for us to "take responsibility for the city"? What is meant by this is not to seek power over people, but at a most basic level, to take responsibility for your neighborhood. The ones that you share a physical location with.

This morning, my main idea is that to thrive in exile is to take up the identity as an alternative community known as God's *Ekklesia*. May I suggest that if we are to take our place in exile seriously, we have to embrace our identity as the *Ekklesia* of God in exile—resisting the pull toward culture wars, resisting the temptations listed above, and walking faithfully in the way of Jesus among the world around us.

Because here is the truth. It is difficult to live in exile. It is challenging to stay faithful. And it can be frightening in a world that is rapidly changing right in front of us. But Church, what if this was the opportunity for our greatest moment. What if the church, as it has throughout history, rises to the occasion and begins to do its most creative work?

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

What does it look like for you? How can you, in the midst of exile, recognize the ways God calls you to be faithful in the ordinary and pray for the shalom of the city? How is God calling you to be faithful in this moment? Over the next few weeks, we will look at how we become a "transformed people who transform the peninsula." I will provide two simple practices that, we as the church, can take up in this moment to lead us toward that end—hope, attentiveness, and hospitality because the challenges are steep.

There is a letter that has been recovered that was written in the second or third century, written to a guy named Diognetus, one of the earlier works of apologetics. It describes what this newly emerging group of people called Christians were like in the world and is a fascinating account of the legacy and impact that the early followers of Jesus had in a world of exile similar to ours. The church, the *Ekklesia*, was still finding its footing within the dominant Roman Empire. Here is how the letter described the early believers.

**For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humankind by country, or by speech, or by dress. For they do not dwell in cities of their own, or use a different language, or practice a peculiar life. This knowledge of theirs has not been proclaimed by the thought and effort of restless people; they are not champions of a human doctrine, as some people are. But while they dwell in Greek or barbarian cities according as each person's lot has been cast, and follow the customs of the land in clothing and food, and other matters of daily life, yet the condition of citizenship, which they exhibit, is wonderful, and admittedly strange. They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners; they share the life of citizens, they endure the lot of foreigners; every foreign land is to them a homeland, and every homeland a foreign land...They spend their existence upon the earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. The Epistle of Diognetus**

What a beautiful picture of what it means to be the *Ekklesia*. What a testament to their ability to exist as outsiders while faithfully maintaining their distinction as an alternative community of God. I love that line that read, "...the condition of citizenship which they exhibit is wonderful and admittedly strange." We know the truth, and the truth will make us odd.

This week, I encourage you also to do both of these things. I invite you to examine the ordinariness of your life. How are you faithful in the mundane, in the simple things. Take stock of the manner that you go about your days, attentive to the ways of Jesus. And then, what is your posture toward the place we call home?

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Catalog No. 1461-1FC