

The Church's Aim

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The weirdness of the last two years has motivated me to rethink a lot of things. One of the most important things I've been rethinking is the Church. A lot of people have dropped out of church activities during the Covid pandemic. Of course, church attendance in general has been declining for a few decades now. Gone are the days of my youth when church was so much the norm that its value seemed almost self-evident.

So, I've been rethinking the Church. What is it? What makes it worth being part of? What is its purpose? Today I want to focus my comments on the question: What is the purpose and aim of the Church? What are we trying to achieve? The question is important for thinking about whether we're doing what the Church ought to be doing. A few months ago I was reading one of my favorite theologians, Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury. He said something that got my attention and stuck with me. He said the goal of the church is communion; in particular, reconciliation through communion.¹ I felt like my eyes had been opened to an important truth. But, what does it really mean? Today I want to share some of Williams's insights and offer some of my own reflections on the church's aim of reconciliation through communion.

We begin to understand the church's goal by reference to our *mission* and our *spirituality*, two words that are implied by the biblical notions of sending and calling. God sends people out to do things. The term "church" translates the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means the "called-out ones" or the "called-out congregation". So, our question may be put as: what are we called out to do? The trivial answers might be: to be like Jesus; or to be the body of Christ in the world. But, my question is more fundamental: *why* are we called-out to be like Jesus or to be the body of Christ in the world?

Williams' thought is that our aim as the church is to be shaped by the divine purpose of reconciliation through communion. We are to become a new, universal people bound together by God's promise and commitment, a commitment whose

¹ Williams, Rowan, "Doing the Works of God" in *A Ray of Darkness* (Cowley, 1995) 221-232. In-text page number citations of quotations from Williams refer to this work, whose ideas are featured liberally in the present homily.

purpose has been made known through Jesus and the New Testament “as the formation of unrestricted community”. Let me repeat this: the goal for the church is the formation of unrestricted community. This goal is dramatically embedded in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). These are not just high-sounding words for Paul. No, he puts this aim of union-out-of-diversity into costly personal practice, as today’s lesson from *Acts* 16:9-15 indicates: recall that Paul had a vision of a man calling for help from Macedonia, which was a Roman province in Europe. Understanding this as a divine call, Paul sailed across the Aegean Sea and then traveled on foot to Phillippi, where Paul stayed for several days. On the Sabbath, Paul and company sat down and spoke to the women who were gathered outside the gate. There Lydia, a Gentile woman, eagerly accepted Paul and his teaching and subsequently took Paul and company into her home. Don’t let the brevity of this story prevent you from seeing its astounding implications. Paul was expecting to help a *man* in Macedonia, but Paul’s journey ultimately resulted in communion between a Jewish man and a Gentile woman, something Paul could not have imagined in his earlier life as a Pharisee. We’d do well to consider its implications for us.

Our goal of forming unrestricted community requires us to *deconstruct* some things and to *create* others. It requires the destruction of barriers that divide people. It requires challenging all the ways we cherish separations of people. On the creative side, it involves constructing communities in which diversity nourishes all within it, where behavior is judged by what it contributes to our common life together. We need to think hard about what this requires of us and what it requires us to avoid.

One temptation, especially in the last 100 years, has been to think of the primary goal of church mission as communicating information to people (e.g., communicating God’s plan of salvation and a prayer you say so you can go to heaven when you die). A related idea is communicating true information to people so that they will adopt the true point of view about ultimate reality. These are primarily scare tactics that produce shallow faith in those it reaches. When we see our mission as working to get people to believe the right things, we signal to them that the church’s mission is all about separating people into those who believe rightly and those who don’t.

This approach is built on a shallow theology. Williams says that we should think about the divinity of Jesus “in terms of a human identity shaped wholly by the divine purpose of reconciliation through communion” (223). This movement into communion embodied by Jesus expresses the very nature of God: the desire to *give*. To give to *whom?* we might ask. We know the answer: to give to *all*. The divine goal is *unrestricted communion*. Indeed, this goal and purpose is expressed and ritually embodied in the universal communion we proclaim and celebrate in the church’s eucharist. In a few minutes, those of us gathered here today will share a common bread and common cup, different people united in the shared body and blood of Christ. Try to imagine extending to every creature the communion our eucharist represents—the shared life together we proclaim when we share the bread and the wine.

What are we up against in our quest for reconciling people in unrestricted communion? The whole world. That’s what the New Testament writers tell us. Many Christians in recent times have taken Paul’s talk about wordliness to be about those who engage in personal sins. But this is a mistake. The world we’re up against is the mutual isolation that we inherit socially from all the division and violence that presents everything to us as an “us” over against “them”. We naturally imitate the people in our society and thereby become constant competitors. The world we’re up against is hostility borne of rivalry. The world of our experience is shot through with competition, with winners and losers, with haves and have-nots. But, Jesus has come to show us a different way. As Williams puts it, by his dying and being resurrected from the dead, Jesus shows us that “there is no situation into which he cannot enter to create new relatedness” (224). As we are the body of Christ, there is thus no situation in which *we* cannot enter to create new relatedness. The church exists to extend this relatedness to all creation.

It is important for us to realize that this perspective is rooted in our theology, in the trinity, which is God’s life in eternal and everlasting communion, a flow of mutual giving and receiving. Just as God’s sending of Jesus is a kind of giving-away, so is Jesus’s complete giving-away of himself. To follow Jesus “is to be involved in a complex act of giving away: to be at the disposal of God’s will, to give away the life we have, so that God’s life can be given through us” (225).

Williams draws out three implications of all this. The first is that there is no distinction between the gospel (the good news of God) and our common life together. The good news *just is* the hope of life together without excluding people and without hostility among people. This is an enormous and difficult task. It will require us to stay vigilant in recognizing how our own fears and divisions diminish us and make us hypocrites. It will require us to expose, both in ourselves and others, hidden deceit. We must not be content with easy harmonies. Personal friendliness toward others comes woefully short, as we are reminded, for example, by the many white people in our country who are personally friendly to racial minorities but do nothing to break the hold of pervasive, structural racial injustice.

We are not talking about making peace *within* the status quo. We are talking about restructuring the world for the purpose of universal, unrestricted communion. The task is enormous and monumental. It will require us to declare limits that will offend people.² It will require us to criticize our own limits of compassion and communion that separate us from others. We are called to nourish a life together that is open to change and susceptible to betrayal. How can we possibly do this? As Williams puts it, the common life together we seek “is sustainable only because of trust in the divine commitment made clear in the Easter event” (227).

Second, the church has a particular responsibility to all who are marginalized. This pertains, of course, to the poor and anyone else disenfranchised by the structures of the world, whether they be women, or racial minorities, or LGBT people, or Ukrainians, or.... Williams reminds us that the church has a special responsibility to those who will not ever function in society as what we think of as normal decision-makers. We are called to communion with the senile, the demented, those dying of disease or famine, and to the severely disabled. Recall Jesus’s charge that we are to go into all the world to share the good news to *every creature* (*Mark* 16:15). Note carefully this principle in action in today’s Gospel reading (*John* 5:1-9) in which Jesus breaks the sabbath laws to heal a man who had been paralyzed and disenfranchised for thirty-eight years. Jesus

² Of course, there will be limits on what we should encourage. Knowing the limits is among the hardest tasks we have before us, for we know our human history is in part a history of excluding those we later wish to include. I have no easy answers here. I am sure the kingdom of heaven is not populated by active terrorists, warmongers, and rapists. There are no guns in the kingdom of heaven. But, the path to universal, unrestricted communion is a path that we will have to tread with people who are now terrorists, warmongers, and rapists.

does not require the man to believe the right things; he just asks the man to tell him what he desires. And then Jesus does what is needed to bring the man back into community. Are *we* willing to look past what we dislike in poor and disenfranchised people and do what is needed to bring them into community?

Third, the church itself must repent and give up its constant temptation to control the world. No doubt the church has done a lot of good in the world (and much more than its detractors give it credit for), but its attempts at control have routinely backfired. History reveals a number of atrocities carried out by Christians in the name of Christ. And many Christians these days are known, not for attempts at reconciliation for unrestricted communion, but for dividing, separating, and excluding people of good will. Think, for example, of the many self-proclaimed Christians who have taken it to be their Christian mission to exclude LGBT people from their communion.

Nevertheless, history reveals plenty of examples for our encouragement. The church that supported slavery was able to put its past in question and change its position. In our own day we are finding substantial portions of the church not only putting its past condemnation of people in question, but also nourishing the otherness of historical others such as LGBT people. Let us remember that the church has changed, and indeed, must continue to do so. Talk of change in the church is hard for some to hear, especially conservatives. But, as Williams says, “Change is only betrayal if we forget that the center of tradition, the heart of what we hand on as saving faith, is the possibility of new beginnings and the truth that our errors of interpretation are not the last word in a community which exists because of a belief in the indestructibility of God’s commitment” (229-30).

Yes, the church must repent of its desire to control the world and the people in it. Williams says that our mission involves a particular kind of *dispossession*, a dispossession of power to control others. We are authorized, not to communicate a set of instructions about what to believe and how to behave, but rather to “embody God’s longing for life in communion here as a reflection of the perfect [communion] of the divine life in eternity (“Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven”)” (230). The focus here is on an *invitation*, a coaxing, or wooing, rather than the force of a demand. As Williams reminds us: “We can offer a share in this life but we cannot control the

response to this offer. It may be rejected, violently or apathetically, ignored completely, or received in unpredictable ways” (230), as it was by Paul.

If there is anything that history has made clear, it is that God’s way, the kingdom of heaven, is not the way of force and control, no matter how much we may want God to zap the world into the shape we want. I often hear religious people crow slogans like “God is good all the time”. Have you noticed that people say things like this only after good things happen? I never hear them say it when their sister has been raped, or their child has been gunned down, or their brother has been killed in war. If God’s way were the way of force and control, we simply wouldn’t have all the horrendous evil we know about.

God’s way is the way of suffering with, of offering, of gift, of self-giving for the sake of communion. You cannot force someone to commune with you. God’s way flies in the face of the way the whole world operates. God’s way offers cooperation, not control; it extends peace, not hostility. It seeks the good of diversity, not exclusion. Its leading question is not: how are those other people different from us and therefore wrong?, but rather: what do they see, desire, and hope for that we can learn from? How can they enrich our common life? If we take this way, we can expect resistance from all quarters: It is certainly not the way of our political parties. If you don’t believe me, then ask yourself what will happen if you say to those in the political party you favor: hey guys, let’s think about how we can construct a better society by seeking communion with our political opponents. You will be laughed at as hopelessly naive.

This is why Paul says the Gospel is foolishness to the world. Ask people if they want peace and communion among all people, and almost everyone will say “yes”. Tell people it can happen and they will think you’re a fool. As the church, we are sent out, not so much to *tell* people it can happen (for talk is cheap), but to *show* them, by our own lives, that it is possible.

I hope you will join me in deep reflection on how we as individuals and as a church body can engage our powers and gifts to extend the offer of communion to all within our purview. And may we at St. Barnabas’ (and everywhere else) keep ever before our consciousness that our aim as the church—with Christ as our head and guide—is universal, unrestricted communion with every creature.