

## The End of Church

Series: Kingdom Come; Revelation 21: 22 – 22:5; Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Today is Mother's Day. Did you know that this is the third most highly attended church-going Sunday of the entire year, after Christmas Eve and Easter? Mother's Day is almost a religious holiday in our culture.

People have strong bonds with their mothers, whether living or dead and whether they were wonderful or not so good in that mothering role. It is a strong bond, maybe the strongest human bond. It is said in clergy circles that, at some point, you have to figure out if God called you to ministry or if was your mother. If the latter, you need to find a different calling. The powerful bond sometimes makes it hard to distinguish between God and mother in terms of the guiding force in our lives.

Aside from receiving a Hallmark card, how do you know, as a mother, if you've done well? How do you measure your job of mothering? Mothers, how do you know? Children of mothers, how do you know your mother has done her job?

Measuring good mothering -- good parenting – is not an exact science. One good indicator is that children become grown ups who are independent and able to live, think, choose, and love on their own.

The problem with that criteria is that there can be a lot of guilt attached if your adult child is not independent and struggles to live, think, choose, and love on their own – especially if they don't do those things in the way you think they should! So, a second measure of motherhood, parenthood, is an internal measurement. Can you let go? Can we let our children be who they are without insisting they become who and what we think they should be? They're going to anyway.

Kahlil Gibran reminds us of the reality of being a parent when he writes "On Children".

Your children are not your children.

They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

They come through you, but not from you,

And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love, but not your thoughts,

For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies, but not their souls,

For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.

For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth.

The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
and He bends you with His might  
that His arrows may go swift and far.

Let our bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;

For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

(Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*)

One of the consistent biblical images for God is as our parent – often our Father, but frequently in a maternal role. The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah wrote:

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

Biblical images are very important and also very limited. For example, in this same passage from Jeremiah, God is seen as Israel’s husband. That had certain very concrete meanings when it was written (at least 2500 years ago). The image lacks that same meaning today, but can help us sense how intimate the relationship is – how protective the role God played bringing Israel out of Egypt.

The covenant was like a marriage. Israel was unfaithful and God divorced her. God’s faithful, however, led to the offering of a new covenant. This new covenant was not to be one of law, rules, and religious practice. It would not be based on procedure or organization, but would be much more intimate and life giving. It would foster greater autonomy for Israel rather than requiring a continuing dependence on God in terms of religious observance.

There would be no more intermediary. The new covenant had no more need of priests, preachers, or religious institutions. God would be direct in the hearts of people – at the seat of their reason, commitment, and will.

Good parenting creates independent children. It creates grown ups. This image of God’s word written on our hearts does not speak to me of a dependent religion needing an institution to translate God to us. Rather, the divine presence could be embraced in each person. Each one of us is a mark of God’s existence. Each one has the spark of divine presence. When we hear or say “they’re in” or “they’re out” of God’s life, we’re mistaken. God embraces all people. That’s why the sign in front of this building says, “Where ALL are welcome!” There is no in-group and no corresponding out-group in God.

In today’s passage from Revelation:

I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God is its light and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

As much as we love and enjoy being together on Sunday mornings and other times, I imagine most of us look forward to church ending and all of us being able to go home or out to lunch – or maybe that’s just me? I’m assuming each person has a home to go to and lunch waiting. The vision expressed in Revelation is of a time when church is ended for good. It’s a time when there is no need of a temple to gather in and no need to participate in religious rituals or listen to sermons. While that is not yet fully case, there will come a time when church will no longer be necessary and that will be a very good thing. Then, we’ll gather just to be together to affirm community in the Spirit of God. Actually, that’s why many of you gather now anyway.

The vision in the book of Revelation was that of first-century Christians who were under intense stress and persecution. Theirs was the vision of a time when all nations, all people, would be together. They envisioned Romans, Christians, and Jews together. In our time, we would add Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, those pesky secular humanists, and all other categories I can’t even remember. We will all gather in the light of God. And God, who is not

so much a Being as Being itself, has inscribed the underlying reality of creation on our hearts so that we gather in peace and in love. That calls to mind another image, John Lennon:

Imagine ... no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for and no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace.  
Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No need for greed or hunger, a brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people sharing all the world.  
You may say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us and the world will live as one.

The Kingdom of God is maybe not so far off at that. Maybe it exists, in the process of becoming, in your life – in our life together. At the same time, one of the ways we need to be working toward that big vision is to strengthen this congregation and its witness now.

The work we do to build up the institution of Crossroads Church can serve the realization of a large vision – a wild dream: the coming of the Kingdom of God in our lives. In three weeks, we will have the opportunity to pledge financial support for the coming year so that the institution of Crossroads Church will continue to exist in this neighborhood and continue to be a tool in the realizing our big vision of the coming of the Kingdom of God. Let us keep that vision in front of us. Let each of us do our part to help this institution survive and thrive.

Crossroads Church has an extremely important prophetic role to play with the Church and the nation. It has an equally important role as a place of helping people grow up in faith, clarify their sense of call, and help move the world toward wholeness. Is that what we should be doing? Yes to both roles. I believe in the way we are seeking to be Church here and now. This expression of Church called Crossroads is worth nurturing and supporting with our time, our treasures, and our talents.

It is important for us to be here and to have this building open. It is important that we offer worship, education, and social gatherings, and all those things that are made possible by your support. Church happens here, though not always in the ways we plan or expect. My son Jonathan went back last Sunday afternoon to play piano and sing at an inner city church where he used to work playing and singing every week. The church provides meals for the homeless and he used to play and sing for people as they were waiting to be seated. Last Sunday, while he was there, an older couple -- African American and clearly homeless -- came in. The woman asked him to play two songs -- *Fire and Rain* and *Imagine* – as part of his set. He did and afterward the woman came by to see him. She told him that the reason they came was to hear him. The food was helpful and appreciated, but it was her soul that needed nourishment. Then she asked if he accepted tips and she gave him a dollar.

Church happens because the space is open. It doesn't always happen in the sanctuary or in services of worship. The institution provided the room and the piano and church happened. It happens here all the time because this space is open.

The ultimate goal of being church is to follow Jesus' example faithfully and to use our gifts to set the world free, to make life more like the life of God. The ultimate measure of church is that people are growing up and developing the ability to faith, trust, live, and choose for the well being of this world, of other people, and the very best for themselves.

We celebrate Mother's Day today. We also recognize the gift of good and healthy parenting. We celebrate the mother role. And we acknowledge with gratitude the mother role church plays for us to the extent she sends us out to make the world better for our having lived. We honor her by living in tune and in synch with the with the nature of God's own life that is baked into the recipe of the universe – fundamental to life itself. As we live that way, we affirm that God our mother will be so proud!