

March 7 How is the Church Still Alive? Matthew 26.69-75; I Corinthians 11.17-22

My two best friends through grade school were Mike Patrizi and Andy Hoyt. We were the three amigos. We didn't just ride bikes, play baseball and stick our tongues out at girls. We built stuff. Andy's dad was an engineer and my dad was a chemist. Mike's dad owned a restaurant but he was the strongest so that came in handy. Andy and I thought this arrangement would work as long as Mike didn't try to *unionize*.

So we didn't just throw things together. We made drawings and prototypes. I remember drawing up plans for stilts. Instead of just nailing blocks to our 10 foot 2x2s, we drilled holes in those boards and used bolts with wing nuts so we could adjust the height of the footrests from about 18 inches off the ground to about 6 feet off the ground. We learned how to walk on them at the lower level and worked our way up to the top.

Our biggest project, however, was a tree house. There was a big fig tree in Andy's yard and the floor would be only about 4 ft. off the ground, so the parents agreed. The three of us sat down to draw our plans. Mike wanted something simple and quick to build; a floor with a rail around the perimeter. I wanted something that looked more like a frontier fort (too many John Wayne movies I guess). But Andy wanted something modern and complex; an entrance up through the floor; an emergency escape route; a crow's nest and the like.

We kept trying to meet somewhere in the middle, but I remember Mike getting really frustrated and leaving. We eventually agreed to build the floor since all of our ideas required a floor. But even that turned ugly as we argued over bracing and who got to hammer.

Andy eventually got to the point where he yelled, "***look, this is my yard, my tree and my boards. We're going to build it my way.***" At this point, Mike and I joined forces. As I remember, the discussion went like this: *Well you can have your tree and your boards. Fine. I'm going to build this myself and when I'm done I'll start a club and you guys won't be in it. O yeah. Well maybe we'll just use your tree house anyway and have our own club. You better not. Just try to stop us. Ok, then I just won't build it. Fine. Fine.* And the tree house was never built.

I was telling my parents about this at dinner and my dad laughed and said, ***Sounds like our deacons.*** I remember not having any idea what he was talking about. Later, I found out.

But the church didn't start that way. When we go to the New Testament, we see the church empowered by the Holy Spirit and filled with unbridled joy, love and peace. In Acts 2 and 4 we read that all the believers ***were together and had all things in common; they were of one heart and soul; great grace was upon them all; they broke bread at home and ate food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day, the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.*** I've never heard of a new church that didn't begin with this kind of energy and enthusiasm.

But it didn't last long. After Pentecost we read about two church members who lied and died. Then came a conflict about Gentile widows being overlooked in the food distribution. Next, a deep conflict flared over how Jewish the Gentile believers needed to become. This conflict would never be resolved. It led to the persecution of Christians, first at the hands of people like Saul, then by the Romans.

Instead of a community that lived on a Pentecostal high, the early church took on the foibles of the world characterized by lies, divisions; factions; gossip; fornication; incest; class conflict and much more. Paul wrote, ***It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans.***

Jesus spoke to the churches in Asia: ***I know your works; you have a name for being alive, but you are dead. You have lost your first love. You're lukewarm believers.*** It went downhill from there in church history with an imperial church converting as it conquered new lands, all at the

end of a sword. It continued with religious wars, inquisitions and witch hunts; with Kings who combined church and kingdom. **It's a miracle the church is still alive.**

The two stories we have heard in Scripture today illustrate the human nature of the church. First, there was Simon Peter, the one who would preach at Pentecost, giving in to fear rather than acting by faith...just like you and just like me. Then in the Corinthian church, there were divisions about baptism as well as conflicts right in the middle of the most sacred ritual of the Lord's Supper. Sadly, our two ordinances have been at the center of fierce and deadly divides throughout Christian history. Like boys trying to build a tree house. **And yet the church lives.**

Take for instance the Landover Baptist Church split over a piano bench and one group created the Holy Creek Baptist Church. *Each faction will have it's own separate service with it's own separate pastor. Since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastor, each will have their own service, which will be attended by factioned members. We are told that the services are far enough apart that neither group will come into contact with the other. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions, between services, so as to please both sides, and avoid any further conflict that could result in violence.*

Now, if members get along too well, decide too easily or serve too faithfully, I get nervous that I'm not really in a Baptist church. We are, most of the time, a boat load of human beings who want to be Christian but we keep drilling holes in the hull. **And yet the church still floats.**

Yes I know the church across town needs three services to accommodate their crowd. They must be more spiritual because more and more people attend. But high profile churches are just like me and just like you; great on the outside and deeply flawed on the inside. The super churches have an underbelly just like the old neighborhood church or the little country church; just ask the folks at the Crystal Cathedral.

The main difference between our church and others is that we see how the sausage is made here, but not there. We don't know where the other churches keep their skeletons. The church has never been without humanity, **and yet she lives on.**

There seems to be only one explanation for this. In addition to being very human and flawed, the church must also be divine. If the church was not infused with the power of God, we would have killed it centuries ago. If the church wasn't more than her members and her ministries, would not be here. But the church lives on in spite of occasional trips to the ICU. The church marches on in spite of her limp; because of The Spirit, and in spite of our foibles.

I remember being in a hospital waiting room with a very tired family anxious to know the status of their chronically ill teenager. I don't remember the name of the disease, but the child had been in and out of hospitals for several years trying to beat it. The treatments started out just making her sick and bald, but eventually, they started taking more and more out of her. At some point she moved to an experimental treatment and it was harder yet.

I think it was the third time the child had to be hospitalized in really bad shape; very critical. The medical team had brought her back from the brink of terminal complication at least two other times. But the family was sliding into despair, coming to realize that this might be it for their tough but sweet little girl.

I was in that room when the doctor walked in and said, *I can't explain it, but she's bouncing back again.* There were hugs and tears. Then he said, *with all she has been through, I honestly don't know how she's still alive.*

But we do know. Beyond our sight, beyond our intent, beyond our power, beyond our understanding; The Spirit of God moves among God's people; and Christ is in the midst of them. That's why we're still alive.