

It's Not About Me

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a young child, I always loved the first week of July. It was my favorite week of the year! Every year, we would gather with friends and family on July 2nd and celebrate my birthday! It was a day all about me, with food and presents and pool parties and water gun fights with my cousins and cake and lots of fun! And before we were even cleaned up properly from the festivities on the 2nd, it would be time to get together for the 4th of July! Every year when I was a little kid, we'd get together with our friends on the roof of the TV station where my mom worked in Roanoke, and we'd watch FIREWORKS! And, would you believe it, these fireworks were being set off just for me!

Now... you have to see these events from my young eyes. I went from one day of happy birthdays and parties, to another day of celebration with all new people, and everyone who saw me wished me a Happy Birthday again! So, from a young age, I began to believe that the Fireworks on the 4th of July... were for ME!

Those were my birthday fireworks, and it was just nice that the whole world (because the Roanoke Valley was the whole world in my eyes) would get together to celebrate my special day in such a fun way. It was a humbling and difficult thing to realize that when it comes to 4th of July Fireworks... It's not about Me.

That's a tough lesson for a child, but it's a tough realization for anyone. Meaning, powerful meaning, had been built for me in connecting those happy birthdays I received with the fireworks I saw, and I really thought they were for me. The well-wishes I received were genuine and I was being invited into the joyful celebration in a powerful way, but at the end of the day, it wasn't all about me.

But with his realization that it's not about me, my mind was opened to consider the real meaning of those fireworks. I learned about freedom, and the group of men in 1776 that claimed freedom for themselves. I learned about men and women throughout history who have fought and struggled to ensure that the circle of humanity included in that original statement of freedom be ever widened to reflect the great diversity of this nation, and that the work of building freedom in this nation is not yet over. Those fireworks took on new meaning, when I realized, It's not about me.

I think it's only natural to fall into a similar trap with our human understanding of what it means to be the Church. We come to worship, and something special happens! We find a place we can call home! We find a community who welcomes and loves us. We find our place of comfort and familiarity and feel like being the church is "meeting our needs."

We can be lulled into thinking that church is good for me! If this is sounding too familiar, don't be afraid! It's an easy trap to fall into! After all, we gather in this body for worship and we are made one through baptism, where we hear the words, "Alexander Carlton, I baptize YOU in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit!" And the whole church welcomes YOU into the body once and for all! We gather around the Lord's Supper where we hear, "This is my body, given for YOU... This is my blood, shed for YOU." YOU claim your seat at the feat of everlasting life. We hear Christ's words echoed across the ages and into our hall, "Peace be with YOU." And through it all we find meaning and purpose in worship and could start to think that this church stuff is all about me being happy, me being comfortable, me being loved... It's all about me!

But friends, I have some very good news today about what it means to be the Church... It's not all about You.

Now I know, that may sound like bad news. That may sound troubling and worrisome, but do not be afraid. Perhaps if we treasure deeply the meaning we've found in being the Church, and turn this joy into seeking as we turn to God's word today, we might just discover who it's all about...

In our gospel lesson we hear Jesus sending out the 70 followers two by two. This is a bold follow up on the sending of the 12 apostles that we heard last week, yet this time they are being sent to even more places, cities that Jesus knows he will not get to with his message of salvation and peace, as we heard from Pastor Lauren last Sunday, Jesus' face is set on Jerusalem. Because his face is set on Jerusalem, because he is on his way to his death and glory, Christ is equipping his followers to be his body and declare the message of his kingdom to the world. We know there is much that Jesus says and does, and there are many messages he could give his followers to share, and yet he gives them only two prompts for proclamation: "Peace to this House" and "The Kingdom of God has come near to you."

Proclaiming this message, this way of life, is the first call of the church and it remains our call today. To live out peace, and witness to the nearness of God's reign, this is what it means to be Christ's church. Notice, it's not about the disciples having a well polished personal testimony. It's not about marching out with the Small Catechism in hand ready to recruit more Lutherans for the cause. It's not marching orders to get more members to the movement or don't come back. It's not a contest to see which disciple can evangelize better. In short, it's not about us.

Jesus sends his followers to live out and proclaim a peace they could not possibly have manufactured for themselves. They are sent to live out a peace that is rooted in a hope that will last beyond the oppression of human systems that deny freedom and dehumanize

communities. They are sent to proclaim the promise that in Christ Jesus God has come near to God's people, and that the promises of God's saving grace are not meant to be known only some far off day in heaven, but here and now, in this life. Eternal life is at hand as we live abundantly, lovingly, peacefully, and hopefully into the Kingdom of God here on Earth. In short, this call is about God. This is God's call, this is God's peace, this is God's kingdom we're sent to share. We can't accomplish any of it on our own. This is all about the new thing God is doing. It's not about me, It's not about you, even though you and I have heard this promise to be true. All we share belongs to God, and we have received it as a gift.

It was upsetting for me as a child to learn that something meaningful in my life wasn't all about me, but today I pray we can hear this truth that It's not about us as a word of deep promise. We know this to be true and a source of hope, because our gospel says that Christ sends the 70 out with nothing. They are sent with no agenda, no well polished spiel, no gimmicks. They are sent out with only peace and the kingdom of God. And God promises that this is enough. God promises that is all we will ever need.

But, in the midst of this faithful work, what happens if God's messengers are not received? Remember last week when Jesus was rejected in Samaria because his face was set on Jerusalem, and James and John wanted to call down fire from heaven? Well, Jesus told them that was a really dumb idea. Their pride, their desire for success, their individual motives were compelling them to seek the violent end to those who opposed God's *Peace*? It's no wonder Jesus rebuked them! Jesus says, "No! It's not about you." Instead, this week, he says simply shake the dust off your feet and move on. Some might try to find ways of construing dust shaking as an act of cursing and rejecting, but genuinely consider those two reactions to rejection—fire and dust shaking... Jesus' preferred method is far less violent. It is far more in line with the way of peace we are sent to proclaim. We're not being sent with our pride and reputation to uphold. It's not about US, it's about the God who sends us out to be the Church of Christ! Because even in the face of rejection, even when others want nothing to do with Christ's way of peace, it changes nothing. Christ tells us even in the face of rejection, and after a shrug and healthy dust shaking, say this, "the Kingdom of God has come near." The acceptance or rejection of this truth does nothing to change the nature of a God who has chosen to be God with Us. Because It's not about your success or failure as an evangelist. It's not about us! This is good news because it costs us nothing to share the way of peace. We lose nothing in others' rejection of our way of peace. Yet it costs us everything, in that this way of peace and kingdom building demands our whole life.

Jesus tells the 70, to take nothing but the peace of God. Jesus' command stretches out now beyond these 70 and into our hallowed halls, sending us and bidding us take nothing but the peace of God. And so we are sent with everything we need.

Jesus says "Eat what is set before you", something that would be very troubling to his Jewish followers with laws of foods that are clean and unclean who are being sent into Gentile lands. "Eat what is set before you" as you live out this way of peace dear friends, because living into and sharing the peace of God is more important than any established rule or human preference. We are being sent in peace and promise to meet God's people where they are, not simply expect them to come to us. Because being the church isn't about us, it's about the God who sends us and makes us one. This God will be with us, whispering the same peace in our hearts that we proclaim, and giving us what we need to face that which is challenging and new. And so we are sent to be challenged and live outside of our comfort zone.

This is the way of the church... peace, mercy, service, and declaring the presence of the Kingdom, even if others will not receive it. All of this points us back to the truth, the freedom, the good news that this life of faith, of being Christ's church, is not about me. The future of the church does not rely on humans getting it right. Because we will get this wrong. We will stumble in sin and feel unworthy to join in the peaceful, kingdom building work of Christ's church. But friends, this is the Good News in knowing that It's not about you! Your sin, your failure, your doubt, your worry, your hesitancy, your anything cannot undermine the peace of God or the nearness of the Kingdom. Christ IS with us, Christ HAS redeemed us, Christ WILL be with us day by day. This work of the Church can't be ruined by you, because it's not about you. That baptism, done for you, is about God claiming you and the church being made more perfect in the multiplication of the body by one new child. That meal of bread and wine, given for you, is about the God who is with us—in, with, and under the elements—and who sustains us with the meal of everlasting life. Your favorite hymn sings praise to God. Your favorite service project reveals God's love to the world. Your favorite liturgical season tells God's story. Your favorite stained glass window, given in memory of your favorite saint, by your favorite pew all give glory to the God who is sending us out in peace to build the Kingdom of God here and now. Your favorite Church is Christ's very body, unified in peace and hope, yearning for justice and new life. You can't mess that up, because it's not about you. This is God's work, and it is the spirit that is sending us. God's work is not about us, but God's love is for us, having written our very names in highest heaven. In this we have hope.

In this freedom, in this peace, let us hear God's call. Let us respond to God's call with open hearts and joy. This work of being the Church is not about us. It is God's work. Amen.