

What is Church for?
Joel 2:23-24, 26-29
November 19, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

²³Children of Zion, rejoice and be glad in the Lord your God,
because God will give you the early rain as a sign of righteousness;
God will pour down abundant rain for you, the early and the late rain, as before.

²⁴The threshing floors will be full of grain;
the vats will overflow with new wine and fresh oil.

²⁶You will eat abundantly and be satisfied,
and you will praise the name of the Lord your God, who has done wonders for you;
and my people will never again be put to shame.

²⁷You will know that I am in the midst of Israel,
and that I am the Lord your God—no other exists;
never again will my people be put to shame.

²⁸After that I will pour out my spirit upon everyone; your children will prophesy,
your elders will dream dreams, and your youth will see visions.

²⁹In those days, I will also pour out my spirit on all your servants.

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What is church?

For some of us it's home, sanctuary, something we can't imagine life without. For others of us it has also been a place of exclusion, or alienation. A place where we've had to pretend, or stay in the closet, swallow the hard questions, or be less than our whole selves.

Growing up, I thought of church as a place where you dress up and behave. That made it special. But it also meant it felt disconnected from real life. Sometimes that was a relief, but sometimes it made me wonder, why? What is this for? All this dressing up, putting on uncomfortable shoes, behaving, acting good, what is it for?

What is church for? Why are we here? What are we doing? What are we giving to?

Out of all the things you could be doing this morning, you're here. And I'm glad. So glad. But statistically we know most of our neighbors aren't. And honestly, if church is mainly about guilt, or irrelevant minutiae, or a regressive world view that rests on the subjugation of more than half of us, then our neighbors are right. If that's all church is going to be, then let's go out to brunch.

But I think there can be more. I think we're more than that. But how would you describe it? Could you tell your neighbors, in a compelling way, what church is for in your life?

These images from Joel might help. To be fair, they're not about church. They're about the restoration of a community long before Christ after a plague of locusts. Not exactly what we're going through But so much of the imagery here captures what I hope for in a community of faith.

Look: It's abundant and earthy. There's rain, lots of it. Plenty of grain. Vats overflowing with wine and oil. The promise of plenty and deep satisfaction.

What is church for? The world tells us there's not enough. We've got to get ours before someone else does. But this—this is the place where there are plenty of hands to hold the baby, plenty of folks to say, "Won't you let me bring you a meal?" plenty of folks to say, "Me too. I've walked through that. You're not alone." It's where the fearful voices of scarcity can recede for a little while. If you could truly trust that there is enough, what would you give—in time, money, energy? This is where we're reminded there's gracious plenty. Enough to go around. Could that be what church is for?

Look again: Twice, in verses 26 and 27 it says, "My people shall never be put to shame." Never. How many times does church cause shame?

But sometimes, when church is real and true, it's reversed. We come back to the promise that we were all created good and there is nothing in us or in the world that is so broken that it cannot be healed, repaired, saved. These are the people, this is the place where there is no need for shame, where we don't have to pretend. No matter your vices, your mistakes, your secrets, no matter what, in this place, among this community, God promises, "there shall be no more shame." If you could release whatever shame or guilt or regret you carry, how much more space would you have for love? That's what we call salvation. Could that be what church is for?

Look again: Instead of shame and scarcity, there's joy.

Let's not confuse joy with happiness. Happiness is delightful. But it is also fickle and fleeting. It's tempting to try to fake happiness. And it's sold on every corner: Buy this drink, this sweater, this power tool, this notebook, this crockpot, this app, and you'll be happy. It's not true, but it's what we're told.

Joy is an entirely different thing. It's deeper, richer. Joy is subversive. It is life despite death. It can't be bought or earned or manufactured. It can't be forced. It's pure gift. It can coexist with the most awful, difficult times of our lives. Joy is something like wonder at the very gift of life. It's praise that pulses down inside, in time with the rest of creation.

Church can be the place where we find that rhythm once again. In our play and our prayer, our long companionship and honest sharing, we can come home to joy. That changes how we live in the world. We grow more tender, more compassionate, more courageous. Could that be what church is for?

Look one more time: The Spirit is poured out. On everybody. Every body.

When the first followers of Jesus tried to describe what they were experiencing, they reached back for this passage from their Bible. It's like this, they said.

It is so deeply tempting to grow cynical and closed. There are such profound problems—inside and out. It's hard to believe anything could ever change. And Lord knows the church has been used to prop up the status quo.

But this is the place where we're reminded that we trust in the One who embodies life—new life. This is the place where we dream dreams and catch a vision and prophesy a future. It's

not for the same old, same old. What would you do if you believed there could be new life? Could that be what church is for?

One more thing—I stopped today’s reading with that lovely stuff about the Spirit, but if you keep reading it gets very weird, very fast. Fire and smoke and the moon turns to blood. And somehow that’s supposed to be the good news. Which is weird.

The Bible is weird. I mean, really. And church is weird. It’s weird to come and sit on wooden pews and sing old songs, some of them even in dead languages, in front of a cross, and say things in unison. It’s weird. It’s not just classic worship like ours that’s weird. Whether it’s in a storefront or an auditorium, whether there’s a praise band and smoke machine, or an organ and stained glass, worship is not really like anything we do anywhere else.

To me, that’s the beauty of it. The point. That weirdness is what it takes sometimes to believe with our bodies and souls the wild things we’re proclaiming: you really are forgiven, there is hope, there’s plenty to go around. The last shall be first, and loss and failure and death aren’t the end. They’re the beginning. It’s profoundly different than what the world tells us, what our hearts are afraid of. We shouldn’t forget that. By any logical reasoning, the goodness of God is wild and weird. And that is good news. Could that be what church is for?

Could it be to release us from scarcity and shame, return us to joy, remind us to dream. That’s what we’re doing here. All the ministries we support in the community, all the books we read—and God knows we love a good book study, all the children we teach, all the meals we share, not one of them is an end in itself. It’s all to root us more deeply in the astonishing, wild, and yes, weird, good news that the heart of the world is love. That’s what church is for.

~ Sarah W. Wiles, 2023