

## **NOT NEGOTIABLE: Church**

In the official calendar of the church, today is the day of Pentecost. The day has its roots in the Old Testament, but that's not my interest today. My interest is in what the day of Pentecost means for us Christians, which is all about the church. Not simply this church or the Methodist church next door or the Catholic churches, or even the Pentecostal churches, but rather the Church - with a capital C - the Body of Christ, the people who believe God sent Jesus to save the world, the people who believe Jesus is the answer to just about any life question.

The Church. Not the building. Not the property or equipment. Not the leadership structure or membership numbers, but the Body, the collection of believers.

I grew up in the Church. Perhaps you did. My grandfather was a pastor in the Church, as am I. And as we gather here this morning we are the Church, at least a small part of it. For the next few moments, I don't want us to be FCCEM. I don't want us to be your home church, or the church you're testing out. I want us to be the Church - another part of the Church is meeting next door, and other parts down the hill, and some in Milwaukee, and some in Nigeria.... You get the picture.

With that as introduction, today we close our sermon series called "Not Negotiable." For several weeks we've been talking about the attitudes and actions that as followers of Jesus we have no choice but to accept. Worship is a not negotiable. Living with purpose is a not negotiable. Giving grace to others is a not negotiable. Loving others, where love means doing good for people we didn't expect to have to do good for, is a not negotiable. When I laid out this series, I decided that it would end today, the day of Pentecost, and it would be my chance to push the Church - to be a salesperson driving home the message, you gotta be here on Sundays. You gotta attend. You gotta study. You gotta serve. You gotta be connected to the Church. It's a not negotiable!

But as I worked on this message and went looking for Scripture verses to back up my desired claim, I kept running into a very different kind of text, verses that didn't say "you gotta go to church; you gotta get connected!" So all I want to do today to close this series is to share a few of those verses with you and to let them wash over us for a moment.

Let's start in Acts 11.19-26. What we're about to hear happened really early in the history of church. We're talking within a handful of years after the resurrection of Jesus. Take this in.....

Let's list all the good things that happen in those verses. First, the church for the first time takes the message about Jesus to people other than Jews. Gentiles were anyone who wasn't a Jew. And what happened when the church expanded its audience? V.21 says the power of the Lord was with them and a large number of the Gentiles believed and turned to the Lord.

Think about that. Here's a bunch of people who have been talking about their faith, but only to certain people - to people like themselves. But by the power of God, they step out of their comfort zone and start talking about their faith to new people, to people not like themselves. And the church grew.

But there's more. When the big shots in Jerusalem heard what was going on in Antioch, they sent an observer - Barnabas - to check out the reports. He gets there. He's pumped by what he sees. And then even more people turn to Jesus. The church grows again.

But there's even more! Barnabas goes to get Saul - whom we better know as Paul - and they spend a year or so in town, where they teach large crowds of people. The church grows again.

That kind of church is not a not negotiable. I can't have us read about what happened in Antioch and then say, now you have to go to church on Sundays, and you have to have a ministry, and you need to be generous in your giving. To talk about the church found in the Acts 11 verses we just read, all I want to say is, I want to be part of a community like that. Don't you? A community of people filled with joy? People through whom the power of God works to change lives. Don't you want to be part of that?

We're curious when ambulances stop in our neighborhoods. We quickly form rubber in our necks when we drive by a car stopped by police - wonder what he did, wonder how fast she was going? It's so much more satisfying to imagine ourselves in THAT kind of church.

Acts 16.5. Again, just listen ..... The church grew larger and larger. It's not the numbers that I'm calling to our attention, it's the vector, the direction that church headed in. The verse doesn't say the church shrank and shrank. It says the Church grew larger and larger. Don't get ego centric or FCCEM centric about this. We're talking about the Church -the body of Christ - growing larger and larger. In these increasingly secular times, when all things religion are in doubt, and skeptics dominate the conversation, think about the joy of being part of a community of people that grows and grows, not because of its preachers or its pew sitters, but because that community is tapped into the power of spirit of God and the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

There are many other verses I could call to our attention. Such as Romans 14.19.... Build each other up. Yeah.

1 Cor 1.10... United in mind and purpose. We live in such partisan times. Your view of the current president might be the same as mine, might be different from mine, but I bet you have a view, and I bet it's not, "I could take him or leave him." In these times, you almost certainly either want to take him or leave him... on the planet Neptune. With all the division and rancor in our politics, you are connected to a community of people who are united in purpose. All kinds of division out there. But in the Church - in the Body - we are one with each other, with our friends next door, across town, and around the world.

Finally, a few more verses from 1 Corinthians 1. Now as we read these, keep in mind that the Corinthians were a divided bunch. They had all kinds of conflicts in their congregation. Here's how Paul introduces his letter to that divided community (1 Corinthians 1.4-9)....

The Church is a community of people who have found their hope and life in Jesus Christ, the son of God. The Church is people, united in purpose, who tell others about Jesus, who bring grace and love to people's lives, and do so, not by their own power, but by the power of God, in partnership with God's son.

You and I, as this little piece of the Church, have what we need to be that kind of people - to be united, to build each other up, to do BIG things, to be strong and encouraged and hopeful and determined and convinced that we in this little piece of the Church, and our neighbors in their little piece of the Church, and on and on and on and on belong to each other and belong to Christ.

That's the not negotiable today, folks. The promise, the spirit, the Church. God says to us and our little part of the Church - and to you in your little place in the Church - I love you. I made you. You belong to me. And I will not now, I will not ever, let you go.

As you work and play and worry and wonder and enjoy this week, remember the Church where you and I and all who believe have a home, a hope, and where we the one who lived and died and lives again so that we can have life abundant and eternal.