

Don't be a "Christian"
Don't "Go" to Church — BE THE CHURCH!

(Mark 12:28-34 NRSV) One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" {29} Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; {30} you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' {31} The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." {32} Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; {33} and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'--this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." {34} When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

A few months ago, Jeff and I when we were meeting to work on sermon ideas and talked about a powerful book that both of us had read. It was one of those books that if I could take a pair of scissors to it, and get an abridged form of it out, I would buy a copy of it for everyone in the church. But, while the first third is WONDERFUL, the other 2/3rds leave a lot to be desired.

Nevertheless, we still felt like it would be a great book to use as we created this sermon series. The main thing we borrowed from the book is found on page 20 of *They Like Jesus but Not the Church* by Dan Kimball. On that page he gives a description of what he calls "being missional." We didn't feel like that term was appropriate for Ridge Church — but the ideas were correct none the less.

Thus we came up with our rather interesting title for the series: "Don't be a 'Christian'".

Over the next month — Jeff and I will be helping you to understand what we mean by "Christian" — using quotation marks — as we look at four areas that we have failed in being what God desires us to be.

In a nutshell — when we use that word "Christian" in quotes, we mean the form of Christianity that has become predominate in America today --- a cultural Christianity that often has very little to do with **the way** that Jesus talked about.

Peter Gomes in an interview in Newsweek makes this comment about American Christianity:

personal religion if we're not careful tends to domesticate God. God is not my private little rabbit's foot to meet all my personal needs. There's nothing wrong in having a religion to which one subjects oneself, but it can't be one's private little therapy. It diminishes the power and the scope of God.

What we hope to do, is look at the message of Jesus and begin to understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus — rather than what many people mean when they talk about being a “Christian.”

Using the word as a VERB rather than a noun.

Our goal is to help each of us to see that becoming a follower of Jesus is about a way of living and a way of understanding life.

So what we are going to look at is how we can become a unique set of people, living in the world, interpreting God, and helping others to be transformed by that special relationship.

But the place that we have to start is with the church — the community that gathers to worship and ask ourselves: WHY ARE WE HERE?

One of the problem today is how most non-Christians look at people who are “Christians.”

Right or wrong — people on the outside look at most Christians as:

- Judgmental
- Self-serving
- Holier than thou
- legalistic
- rigid

Sometimes even we look at each other and use those kinds of terms.

And to be honest — we have earned most of those comments.

Paul in the 4th Chapter of Ephesians does a good job of defining for us what the church should ideally be. And in doing that — he refers to the church repeatedly with imagery from a ship.

Do you know what the NAVE of a church is?

it is the part of the church that you are sitting in.

Any idea where the word Nave comes from?

It comes from the Latin word Navis which means ship

Paul sees the church as communal in nature and when you are on a ship you are forced to be in community.

But what does this community look like?

With the chains of his own imprisonment rattling in the background, Paul emphasizes an even stronger tie that should bind the Christian community together — the “bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). That bond is defined by the virtues that Paul writes about in verse 2 of chapter 4: humility, gentleness, patience, dealing with each other with love and being unified in the Spirit.

As a community we have shared beliefs — and Paul rattles off a litany of elements we share as a community of faith: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God.

The church is a community of shared beliefs.

So unified, we are better able to respond to the call of Jesus to follow with him, to be “together” with him on a journey of faith that is not merely an individual spiritual quest but a group travel experience to some of the neediest people and places in the world. It’s the kind of trip where everybody has a role and a responsibility, providing part of the resources for the journey.

Finally, the Christian life is also a *caring* life.

Christians speak the truth in love (4:16).

Paul gets even more specific, offering a whole laundry list of examples of how the church is a caring community, not a bitter community, or thieving community, and certainly not a group that lives like a gang of Gentiles.

Paul concludes by saying: “Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:31-32).

Unfortunately, instead of being on the journey together — we spend too much of our time arguing and fighting with one another over the irrelevancies of life. Of who is welcome in the community and who is not.

We make the church a place or a possession instead of an attitude and a verb.

For me, this last trip to Israel — that was the lesson that I really had driven home to me.

That religion — and it doesn't matter here if we are talking about Christianity, Judaism, Islam or anything else — often slips into an institution.

It becomes about BEING RIGHT
saying the right things
doing the right things

Instead of DOING RIGHT

We make the Church into something — rather than a means to something

The church becomes a place we go to — rather than a way of life

Do you understand what I mean?

Let's go back to the terms that people often use to describe the church.

Judgmental
Self-serving
Holier than thou
legalistic
rigid

Of course if we understand the function of Church this way then we ARE these things.

We are RIGHT in our practice and in our beliefs and everyone else is WRONG!

But is that what Jesus means when he tells us what it means to be a part of the church.

Someone comes to Jesus and asks him — WHAT IS THE PRIMARY RULE?

And what does Jesus say?

Believe this
Pray this way?

“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and

with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

And if Jesus had stopped there it would be quite understandable for us to see church as about BELIEVING correctly.

Instead Jesus went on and added:

“The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

And just in case we really didn’t understand what Jesus was trying to tell us. The scribe that Jesus was having this conversation with rephrases Jesus message into plain language.

“You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' — this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

We are not just supposed to GO to church — We are supposed to BE the Church!

But the bigger question is HOW do we do that.
How do we BE the church.

That is what we are going to address as we look at what it means to follow Jesus in the 21st Century.

I really don’t think that it has changed much — but just as it wasn’t easy then, it isn’t easy now.

Mainly because we think the church — we think being a “Christian” is about us!

But it is not — it is about a way of life — it is about following God