

Church Doctrine Part 9
Ecclesiology, The Study of the Church
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Have you ever had that experience where you read a little bit of the Bible, and it's a piece that you've read before – maybe even many times – but on this particular occasion, it just takes your breath away because it's so perfect?

It's rare, and I've only had it happen a few times, but it's like all of a sudden God is speaking directly to me through scripture, answering questions I didn't even know I had, and suddenly it all becomes crystal clear...

And there's this huge AH HA awakening that literally transforms my understanding of life, the universe, and everything in it.

Yep, it's like that...

It is a beautiful awakening, and thanks be to God, that is how I landed on our passage for this morning – this final day of our sermon series on Church Doctrine.

Nine weeks! Today is number nine, and that is one heck of a long sermon series.

In the beginning I was actually questioning my sanity in taking this on, but in all honesty I am really going to miss the study.

I mean, you all get to hear a segment every week, and that's been extremely interesting, or so I've been told, but I get to study it, and live it, and then tell you all about it, and believe me the experience has been a very rich and rewarding one!

Throughout this sermon series I have learned so much about the church and humanity, and that famous crossroads where humanity meets divinity, and it has changed me – considerably.

And that's what I love most about preaching.

I get to dive deep into our best and worst theological thinking, and then I get to emerge – even more burnished than I went in.

But there is a price to pay for that, because I always end up sacrificing a lot of old ideas about myself and the world around me, and sometimes it can be pretty painful – and difficult to understand.

So in today's reading Jesus gets right to the heart of what that feels like when he says he is the vine, God is the vine-grower, and his disciples are the branches, and if certain branches aren't producing fruit, then the vine-grower removes them, but if certain branches are producing fruit, then the vine-grower will periodically prune them – so they will produce even more fruit.

And this explains so much about why the faith journey can seem so painful at times –

It explains why submitting to the transformative work of the Spirit is such an awkward, and clumsy process –

It explains why we sometimes feel a little bit bald and a whole lot vulnerable –

Because this whole thing is about pruning away who you are not, so that who you are can be fully awake and present in the world.

The journey of faith can be incredibly painful and glorious all at the same time – and I still don't know how I feel about that, but I sure am glad that I have you all to walk through it and compare notes with.

And I don't know, but maybe that is at least part of the reason we are called to do this thing together – as a church – so that we don't have to do it alone.

So today for our final chapter of Church Doctrine, we are going to be talking about Ecclesiology, which is the study of the Christian church or the doctrinal beliefs of the church.

Which is what we have been doing all summer – studying the doctrinal beliefs of the church, but hopefully you have come to see that there is more to the church than doctrine.

There are the people; there is the call, and there is the journey. And that's what I would like to talk about today.

The word ecclesiology is actually a combination of two Greek words: “ekklesia,” means “an assembly of citizens” or “called out ones,” and “ology,” means the study of.

In the church, ekklesia refers to those "called out" by God from worldly existence to a new life in Christ, so ecclesiology is the study of the called out ones, or the assembly of believers.

Ecclesiology encompasses the nature of the Church.

It asks questions like, what is the Church.

What is the fundamental mission of the Church?

Who has the authority in the Church?

And what authority does the Church have in the life of the believer?

Ecclesiology is where all of our church doctrine comes from, and that’s important, but as we have come to see this summer, the tendency has always been to get hung up on the demands of the study while ignoring the needs of the assembly.

So today I want to pay attention to the assembly; because ultimately, Christianity isn’t something to be studied and explained, it’s something to be lived – by people.

It is not doctrine or a creed or a series of comprehensive laws or the perfect set of Bible verses... Christianity is a way of life that will transform you and prune you of everything you believe to be true about yourself.

And that, all by itself is a pretty wild ride, but probably the most difficult piece is the part where we do it together – in community.

Because doing this thing together means we have to get over ourselves; it means there will be times when we are required to reach out in forgiveness and reconciliation; it means listening and humbling ourselves, and it means coming back to the table over and over again – regardless of how wounded we feel.

Doing it together is the ultimate challenge of the Christian way.

Because in the secular world you don't have to do any of those things. In the secular world you can just ignore the phone, delete the email, call in sick, go back to bed, and avoid contact altogether...

But we can't do that here – not in the church – not in the fellowship of believers. And that can be a real pain sometimes, but that *is* the Christian way of life.

It *is* what this whole thing is about...learning to live together as one body... because ultimately that is what we are... one body.

The mission of the church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ. And while doctrine is nice, the only way to accomplish our mission is to just climb in the arena and do it.

So with all of our little quirks and peculiarities, we work together and we practice the way of Christ together as we make pasties, serve food to the hungry and care for children.

We practice the way together as we learn from the Word of God, break bread and pray together.

And even as we are chasing bats, unplugging toilets, and trying to figure out how to make ends meet, we are practicing the way – together...

Sometimes it's hard. Sometimes we clash; sometimes it feels like it's just not worth it, but despite its costly nature, our practice of the way – together – has blessed us with this community – this safe space where our spirituality deepens and our faith is strengthened in ways that are otherwise impossible.

That is what it means to be the church; that is what it means to be a community of people who have been called out by God from worldly existence to a new life in Christ.

Church is about connection and relationship through our life together in Christ, and when that is the emphasis of church, we are given a taste of the kingdom of Heaven.

But that's not how the world perceives the church at large. And with good reason. Over the summer we have uncovered a long history of church behavior

that has been anything but Christ-like, and it is this behavior that the world is most familiar with.

For two thousand years the world has been torn to pieces by a church that values its doctrine over its people and its authority over its compassion. A church that defines itself by who is in and who is out –

And who wants to sign up for more of that? Because let's face it, that's just an extension of everyday life. That's what the rest of the world looks like.

When I signed up for church it was because I saw something different. I saw something better. I saw people working together, breaking bread together, worshiping together and sticking together. And I wanted to be a part of that. I wanted to *belong* to that.

And I believe with all my heart that most people want a community of faith where they can belong, knowing they are safe even in the messy imperfection of their humanity.

No church community is perfect because no human being is perfect. We will encounter all sorts of sinners in our church community starting with ourselves.

But when we remember that the branch cannot bear fruit apart from the vine, we realize it is in our imperfections where we find our greatest opportunities for offering up our fruit, and it is in our imperfections where we see how much the pruning has paid off.

Being the Church is about connection and relationship – through Christ – and that is the part we can never afford to forget.

Without Christ we end up with a bunch of dead doctrine and dead dogma which has always led to a lot of pain and suffering.

Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

He also said, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

In this day and age we are seeing a lot of faith communities go up in smoke; and we are wondering about the fate of the church as a whole, but this text reassures us that this is a necessary and needed practice if the church is to survive.

The vine-grower is lopping off all the dead-weight, and things are starting to look a little sparse, but if the church is to produce good fruit the dead-weight has to go!

Which means that now is our time.

Now is the precise time for the church to bear fruit.

Now is the time when we are being called to practice the way of Jesus *out there* as a celebration of how God has blessed us *in here*.

Now is the time to bear fruit and give the world a taste of the kingdom.

There have been a lot of surveys conducted and even more data analyzed over the decline of the church, and what it always comes down to is that feeling of being judged – that feeling of not measuring up.

I get that. That was my experience and I walked away from it too.

And there is still a lot of that going on out there.

But then I was exposed to something different. I was offered a taste of God's heavenly kingdom at a church potluck, and within a month I became a member of that church, because I knew that I had found my place of belonging in God's heavenly kingdom.

We all want that. We all want to taste God's heavenly kingdom right here on earth as it is in Heaven. And for the person who has never experienced it, or for the person who hasn't experienced it for a long time, it is a complete game-changer.

Now is our time to bear fruit because the world is starving for a taste of God's heavenly kingdom. Wherever we go – wherever we are, the world is starving for a taste of God's heavenly kingdom.

And we can offer that. It might be a minor taste; it might be a major bite, but even the tiniest sliver of grace means a lot, and we can offer that.

So as much as you can, as much as your resources will allow, I urge us to keep bearing fruit.

I urge us to keep coming together for worship and prayer and singing and celebrating and the breaking of bread so that we can keep this energy and fellowship going strong.

And I urge us to take that energy with us wherever we go.

I truly believe that this fellowship of believers radiates God's justice, mercy and love. So, let us never grow weary in well-doing, let us never take for granted the blessings of fellowship, and let us never lose sight of the importance of practicing the way.

May it be with you all according to God's word... Amen.