

4 May 2008

A couple of months ago, I was having a conversation with a ministerial colleague of mine, and he said that the purpose of the church is mission. (Yes, I have to admit, we ministers actually sit around and discuss this kind of thing!) A church has to have a mission, he said, or else it's not a church. Of course, if you talk to other ministers, they'll say something else is the church's true purpose. Mega churches, for example, would say that the purpose of a church is evangelism, creating new disciples (in other words, gaining new members). A lot of churches in the UCC would probably say that the purpose of the church is social action. We are called to be actively engaged in the world, working for peace and justice.

It's not really that any of these answers are wrong. At various points in my life, I probably would have given all of those answers myself. There's plenty of room for a diversity of answers, and I suspect it's all part of God's plan that individual congregations might answer that question differently – hence Paul's discussion of “diversity of gifts but the same Spirit,” which is what Pentecost is all about, so we'll leave that to next week!

So this question about the purpose of the church is kind of an ecclesiastical Rorschach test. The answer says more about the person answering it than it does about the church. At any rate, when this colleague said the purpose of the church was mission, at first I automatically agreed with him but then I pulled back. For one thing, what exactly is mission? One could argue that evangelism and social action are forms of mission, too. And it's not that the church shouldn't do those things, but it seems to me that something else comes first, or more at the center. Because there are a lot of other organizations out there that also do mission, in the form of social service or social action. Churches aren't the only organizations that collect cans for food banks, or lobby for laws that protect the weak from being exploited, for example. Another way to ask the question is to ask, what is it about the church that is unique? What is it about the church, that if the church disappeared, would go noticeably missing in the world? And it seems to me that the purpose of the church is to worship God, to praise God. Or as Jesus says in our passage from John's gospel, to glorify God.

Now on the one hand, that answer might seem obvious. Well, duh. What else do we get together for every Sunday? On the other hand, that answer might not seem enough. I heard someone give that answer in seminary, and at the time it didn't seem enough to me. I was more in the mission camp back in those days. The church ought to be *doing* something, and “worshipping God” seemed a bit too, well, *boring* for me. So it's rather ironic that these days I would go back to that answer.

Let's look a bit closer at our passage from John. This prayer that we've heard comes at the end of Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples. There's no Last Supper in John's gospel. Instead, Jesus washes the disciples' feet and then launches into a speech that lasts for three chapters. It's not that John didn't know about the Last Supper. But three other gospels had already been written at that point, and sometimes I get the feeling that John doesn't want to just repeat what everyone has already heard. This gospel was written about one hundred years after Jesus' birth. The church has now become widespread throughout the Roman Empire and has started to catch the attention of the authorities, and it's not very favorable. John's gospel was possibly written during the reign of the Emperor Domitian, who fiercely persecuted the Christians, so the author wanted to urge believers to take heart in the face of violent and even deadly opposition.

It's in that context, then, that we hear this prayer of Jesus on behalf of his disciples. And he prays it not only on behalf of the twelve, but also on behalf of all the disciples that would come after them, throughout history and up to the present day and beyond. So when we hear him now, he is praying about us, and the word he uses the most here is "glorify." "Glorify your son so that the Son may glorify you. I glorified you on earth, so now glorify me in your own presence," and on and on, because John wants to make sure we get the point. The Son and the Father are a Mutual Glorification Society.

But then he goes on and adds the disciples – including us – to all this glorifying. "I have been glorified in them." Now, what exactly does "glorify" mean? It's one of those words we use all the time, but what exactly does it mean? The dictionary says it's to worship, to praise, but with a sense of splendor and extravagance. The Hebrew word that gets translated as "glory" in the Bible has the sense of brightness, splendor, magnificence. Extravagance! You think of expensive offerings, of gold gilding and diamonds and pearls, the light reflecting so dazzlingly off them that they are blinding. Hence the image we see so often in Christian art of a halo, a dazzling light that Jesus emits.

That's the image. But how is all this glorification happening here in our passage? Does Jesus glorify God by presenting God with jewels and treasures? Is he asking for treasures from God? Of course not! Rather, Jesus says, "I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do." That sounds kind of like the mission that my ministerial colleague mentioned, except notice that it's really God's mission. Jesus just carried it out. And we as disciples, we too carry out that same mission, but it's not ours, it's God's. Jesus goes on to say, "Now glorify me in your own presence," and how does he want that to be done? That's when he starts praying about the disciples. "They were yours, and you gave them to me, and now I give them back to you. What's mine is yours, and what's yours is mine, and I have been glorified in them, so Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one."

I quoted that at length, and John, bless his heart, can be so convoluted in his language, but he does so in order to stress what he thinks is so important, and the edited version of it would go something like this: I glorified you by doing your work on earth, a work which I have passed on to my disciples, so now glorify me by protecting them – in the face of all that persecution I mentioned earlier. For just as Son and Father are one, now the disciples are also part of this Mutual Glorification Society, and the hallmark of all this glorifying is not the giving of expensive and shiny treasures, but is self-giving. For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten Son, and that Son in turn gave his life in order to complete that work, so we as disciples are called to give ourselves to one another as we continue that work which was from the beginning, which was God's self-giving love for us.

Okay, I feel like this sermon is as convoluted as one of John's speeches, but I think this is so important! Because when the world thinks of glory, it thinks of medals of honor and grand prizes and expensive gifts. But for Christians, glory means "there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends." So our purpose as a church is to worship God, to give glory to God, and we do so by giving of ourselves, both to God, to do God's work, which is to love one another. And mission and social action are two ways that we show that love, but in the end, or rather in the beginning, it's all about love. Love! It's so simple it sounds stupid, but it's so profound – because what other institution in all the world is about love? There are a lot of fine and important institutions out there, but none of them has love as its purpose. Except the church. We love each other, but not a mere emotion or feeling. We love each other in word and deed. We glorify God through our love for one another.

Years ago I had a friend who was an Eastern Orthodox Christian. I was not a minister yet back then, and she was not a minister either, but we also had these kinds of ministerial conversations, and I asked her one time why God created the world, and she said, "Because God wanted to love us!" I didn't understand her answer at the time, but I do now, or at least

more than I did then. I couldn't understand how God could love us before we were even created, but the point is that God from the beginning, from before the beginning, God wanted to love. God is the One who loves. God is defined by God's love, but it's a love that can't exist in a vacuum. It's a self-giving love, so God created the world. And that is our purpose, the reason why the church exists: to glorify God, and to love one another. Without that, the world would indeed be a much colder, darker place.