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 Bridgeway Community Church
 Series: Winter Guest Speaker Series
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**WINTER GUEST SPEAKER SERIES:
 “Being Church” (Shane Claiborne)**

I. SERMON INTRODUCTION

Hello Bridgeway! It is so good to be with you today. Dr Anderson tells me that your theme is “Come Home,” and you’re talking about what it means to be the church. I was talking to one of my neighbors about that theme, and Spanish is her first language. She was telling me that sometimes we make things too hard to understand in the church, like when theologians talk about the “incarnation.” That’s a big theological word, but she said that in Spanish, when you order your burrito with meat, you ask for it *con carne*: “With flesh.”

Main Point:

Jesus is God *con carne*, God’s love fleshed out!

Now what it means to be the church is to be the Body of Christ to the world, God’s love “fleshed out” for all to see and feel. We are called to be the hands and feet of Christ!

II. SHANE’S STORY

I grew up in the Bible-Belt, in a Methodist church. And Methodists have the fire symbol, representing the Holy Spirit, on everything: crosses, hymnals, the pulpit, the church sign. Methodism started as a fiery revival... John Wesley and the Methodists were fully committed followers of Jesus, pro-abolitionists who fought against slavery and once said, “As soon as I have money in my hand I try to get rid of it as quickly as I can before it corrupts my heart!” He said, “If I die with more than \$10, everyone can call me a liar and a thief, because I’ve betrayed Jesus and the poor!” He was a fiery man.

I was talking with a bunch of Methodist bishops and I asked them, “If John Wesley was alive today, do you think he would be Methodist?” They didn’t like that joke...

But in high school I was invited to a Pentecostal church and I went and got born-again. I got rebaptized. But I had to spit out some bones from my time with the Pentecostals too.

Yet all along, I didn't give up on church because I was so drawn and captivated by Jesus. I went from the Pentecostals and spent some time with the Catholics, because in college a group of friends and I wanted to learn how to be like Jesus. The most Jesus-like person we could think of was Mother Teresa! So we went and lived in India for the summer and served the poor, the sick and the dying with her.

Every morning, Mother Teresa insisted on taking the Eucharist. One day I asked a nun why we did Communion every day, and the Catholic sister replied: "You've heard the saying, 'You are what you eat'? That's what we're going for... We want to be like Jesus!"

Mother Teresa prayed every day that she would spread the fragrance of Jesus wherever she went. My friend, Stanley Hauerwas, says that Christians are supposed to be air fresheners in the bathroom of the world. Sadly, sometimes, we have to confess that the church smells like something else...

Years ago, the Barna Group went to every state in America and did a large-scale poll on what people thought of when they heard the word "Christians." The number one response was *anti-gay*. The second most common response was *judgemental*. The third, *hypocritical*. And the list didn't get any better from there!

What broke my heart was that not one person said the thing that Jesus prayed his followers would be known by... LOVE (see **John 13:35**). Often, we have become known more for who we *exclude* than for who we have *embraced*! For what we are *against* more than what we are *for*!

Main Point:

I've noticed that the church is often better at making *believers* than at forming *disciples*...

We've been so focused on teaching people the things that we believe that we've reduced Christianity to a doctrinal statement. But Jesus came to invite us into a Revolution of God's love! You can believe stuff without being filled with Christ's love! It says in **1 Corinthians 13**...

- *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NIV)*

So no matter what contradictions I experienced in the church, I kept leaning in because I didn't give up on Jesus. As Mahatma Gandhi said when asked about Christianity: "I love Jesus... I just wish the Christians were more like him."

Where I really caught vision for what it means to be the church was in college back in the 1900s, way back in 1995! Someone in the cafeteria at my Christian college threw down a newspaper that reported on how dozens and dozens of homeless mothers, children, and families took up residence in an abandoned Catholic Church in Philly. But the Archdiocese of Philadelphia told them they had 48-hours to get out before they could be arrested for trespassing.

As good evangelicals, we had a prayer meeting for the families. And as we cried out to the Lord for Him to do something, I heard clear as day the Lord say: “I did do something... *I created you!* Go and join them!” Sometimes God is waiting for us to be the answer to our prayer!

So a group of us went and joined them, and it was there that I felt like I was experiencing church as I never had before. It felt like the early church in the Book of Acts, where it says...

- *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had. 33 With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God’s grace was so powerfully at work in them all 34 that there were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales 35 and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need. (Acts 4:32-35 NIV)*

Some of the families that lived in that community have kids that are all grown up, and we are still doing life and work together. But I have to say that I am concerned about a church that often deserts the very neighborhoods Jesus would be moving into. People call my neighborhood in Philly, Kensington, “the badlands.” I always say you have to be careful what areas you call “the badlands,” because that’s where they called Nazareth where Jesus was from!

III. LEARNING TO BE “CHURCH”

Scripture is so clear. The longest prayer recorded in Scripture is Jesus’ prayer that the church would be *one*, as the Father, Son, and Spirit are one (see **John 17**).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul talks about the unity of the Body of Christ, and he says...

- *The parts [of the body] that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. (1 Corinthians 12:23 NIV)*

One of my friends says, “That is God’s affirmative action!” God is affirming that which we are slow to affirm. That’s why we can wholeheartedly say, “Black Lives Matter!” Some folks just want to talk about how “All Lives Matter”...

But as one comedian says, “If your wife comes up to you and says, ‘Baby do you love me?’ You shouldn’t respond, ‘Honey, I love *everyone*.’”

God’s affirmative action is God correcting the injustices of the world we live in, and so we need a church that can say, “Black Lives Matter!” and “Palestinian Lives Matter!” And until we can say that, we don’t really believe that ALL lives matter.

I still believe in the necessity of being “born again,” but the more time I spent in the church, I began to notice a pattern. One of my mentors, Tony Campolo, used to say: “We come to the altar singing ‘Just As I Am,’ and we leave the altar *just as we were*.”

When we come to Jesus, we ought to have a love that is bigger than biology and a fidelity bigger than patriotism, because we believe we are part of a GLOBAL family! The Bible doesn’t say, “For God so loved America,” but “*God so loved the WORLD...*” (**John 3:16 NIV**).

Another place I learned what it means to be “the church” was in Iraq. I went in 2003, in the middle of the war, to be a presence of peace during the “shock and awe” campaign when over 900 bombs were dropped on Baghdad. And I was there in the Middle East, worshipping Jesus with hundreds of other Iraqi Christians who were singing “Amazing Grace” in Arabic. And after the prayer meeting, I went to the Bishop of Iraq and said something ignorant. I said, “I didn’t realize there were so many Christians in Iraq!”

The Bishop, very sternly but patiently, replied: “Look out the window and see the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers. The Garden of Eden was right around the corner. Son, you didn’t invent Christianity in North America; you just domesticated and colonized it. We are praying for the church in North America!”

And let me say that every life lost on October 7th in Israel was precious and made in the Image of God... *But no more precious* than every life in Gaza right now!

Dr Martin Luther King said: “The Church is not meant to be the master of the State or the servant of the State, but the *conscience* of the State.”

That’s why in Philadelphia when the city started to pass laws discriminating against the homeless, those of us in our community knew we needed to do something. The city banned distributing food in public, so we held a big worship service in Love Park and distributed

Communion. And none of the police wanted to arrest anyone during Communion! After we shared in the Eucharist together we kept breaking bread and brought some pizzas in to feed everyone, and that's when the police surrounded and arrested us.

Some people have a testimony where their life was a mess and they went to jail and then they found Jesus and got it together. Praise God! But my testimony is that I pretty much had my life together until I met Jesus, he messed me up, and that's where the trouble started! I didn't go to jail before I was a Christian, but I sure have been to jail a lot since then!

In court, when we went to trial, the District Attorney tried to throw the book at us. But the judge interrupted the DA in the middle of the trial and said: "It's not a question that they broke the law. The question is why we are passing laws in the city that hurt vulnerable people. Let me remind the court that if it weren't for good people breaking bad laws, we wouldn't have the freedom we do today. These are not criminals, they are freedom-fighters, and I find all of them not-guilty on all charges!"

The church is called to be the conscience of society and a prophetic presence in the world! The Prophets in Scripture aren't just telling us the future, they want to challenge our imaginations so we can change it! They are saying to us, "*Can you imagine a world in which the people of the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks?*" (see **Isaiah 2:4** and **Micah 4:3**)

A group of us in my neighborhood read this passage and decided to call people to turn in their guns so we could beat them into garden tools. We took the barrel of a gun and turned into a gardening shovel! I tell my evangelical friends: "This is what it looks like when a gun gets born again!" We need God to expand our imagination so we can reforge tools of death into tools that bring life! We need God to expand our imagination so we can see that his love is bigger than we ever imagined...

V. CONCLUSION

Let me close by saying that I think the things we believe are very important. I believe in the virgin birth and resurrection of the dead, I believe the core tenets of the Christian faith... but I also believe that, if Jesus is right, in the end all of us will be gathered before God for Him to ask us some questions. And the Lord won't just give us a theology quiz! The Lord won't just say, "Virgin Birth - agree, disagree, or strongly disagree?" We might wish that was all he'd ask us! But if what Jesus says in Matthew 25 is right, the Lord will say...

- “Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’ 41 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ 45 He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’” (Matthew 25:40-45 NIV)

Maybe God will ask the children of Gaza, “Who were the peacemakers?”

Don’t get me wrong, good works do not earn our salvation; good works *demonstrate* our salvation! If we do not see our faith manifest itself as good news to the least of these, we may be believers, but we are not FOLLOWERS!

Maybe you’ve grown up in the church and believed all the right things, but you are not a disciple. The Lord invites you today to lean into the suffering of the world – to BE church – and to be part of the incarnation of God’s love on the earth, *con carne*.

Let’s pray!