

Being Church

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
January 12th 2020, Baptism of Our LORD Sunday
Matt Matthews

At the conclusion of today's sermon, we will ordain and install officers. This is something we do every year. About a third of our leadership rotates off the Session and conclude their work as Deacons, and every fall the congregation elects other leaders to fill their shoes. In January we "ordain" and "install" them to the positions of Elder and Deacon. Every church of every denominational stripe has some process of electing (or appointing) and installing leaders.

It's part of being church.

The people who the congregation elects are imperfect sinners—just like us. Save for the grace of God, every person called out to serve is perfectly unworthy. They are collectors of stamps, or teachers, or car buffs. They are gifted in certain areas; they are not gifted in other areas. Politically speaking they probably represent a wide spectrum of views. Some say "to*may*to," some say "to*mah*to."

I'm grateful for the saints who have gathered on this corner, more or less, since 1850, and in this very building since 1867¹¹. I'm grateful for the saints who have come before us to serve God in this place.

It's all a part of being church.

Some decades ago, we elected a man named Gordon Johnson to serve as an elder. He served two terms in that office. He spent much of his adult life in this church serving as a deacon, and helping to lead our education program. He and his wife, Fran, taught in public schools. He collected stamps. They raised their kids here. They attended church dinners. While I have no idea about their finances, it's safe to presume they gave their money to support a unified budget. It's equally safe to presume Gordon and Fran gave above-and-beyond to extra causes: to the Christmas Eve offering, for example, and to the Rain Drop Mission offering we collect in the summer.

It's all part of being church, and since they were members of the church, it's what they did.

Fran and Gordon invited their friends and fellow teachers Betty and Gary Wiseman to visit this church. The Johnson's steadily nurtured, welcomed, and re-invited the Wisemans, and as their friendship grew, the Wiseman's attendance grew. They became active members here because—simply put—their friends Gordon and Fran kept inviting them, and they wanted to be part of God's work here.

It's all part of being church.

Fran got sick. Gordon stayed at home to take care of her. Care Deacons were assigned to visit the Johnsons. Some years later Fran died. Gordon became less mobile and attended very little in his last years of life. We functioned without Gordon and Fran. None of our new members had the pleasure of even knowing Gordon and Fran Johnson who once did so much here, were known, were visible.

This ebb and flow of involvement is part of being church, too.

On this past Monday Gordon William Johnson died at Carle Hospital. On Friday, in a day of steady, light rain we interred his ashes next to his wife's in the church columbarium, having already, by the grace of God, joined his wife in the church triumphant.

This is being church, all of it: the gathering at a grave and the lifetime that lead up to that solemn moment.

* * *

This pattern of service continues in the church with you—those of you dozing this very moment. Your love, your service, your above-and-beyond participation, your prayer. You show up. You sing a song in that unique voice of yours. You have a cup of coffee and a doughnut. You teach a Sunday school class on the Ten Commandments. You pick up trash on State and Church streets. You hug a friend suffering though a tough time. You pray for peace in these pews. You weep here, you doubt here, you bring your questions, and your hopes, your families, your dreams. You give and you receive.

This ordinary ebb and flow has been happening in Christ's church since his first disciples first gathered. Like them, we worship. We marry. We bury. We baptize. We ordain. We install. We confirm. We come to committee meetings. We laugh with each other. We serve. We pray.

And every generation hears the story of God's love over and over again. We meet Jesus on the waters of the Jordan, watch him get baptized, hear John say, "I'm not worthy," and we hear the voice of God say of Jesus, "This is my son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The banks of that river have always been a gathering place for the church.^[2]

We have sat at the feet of Peter and heard his sermon. Peter tells the story of Jesus in a straightforward way. His sermon could have been the church's first power-point:

- God shows no partiality
- God loves those who are faithful.
- God sent Jesus.
- Jesus is Lord of all.
- God anointed Jesus of Nazareth at his baptism with the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Jesus healed and did good.
- God was with Jesus.
- We disciples saw this.
- Jealous people crucified Jesus.
- God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day.
- Jesus appeared the disciples.
- Jesus commands us to share the good news.
- Jesus will judge the living and the dead.
- Jesus redeems the living and the dead.

And we nod. We nod and we say, "Thanks be to God." And we ask, "How will God use me to serve." And we sit next to people like Gordon Johnson in these padded pews. We serve with them. We laugh with them. We argue with them. We grow with them. We look up to them. And others, amazingly, look up to us. We are growing in grace together.

This is what is happening here, today, now. To God's glory we are attempting to be Christ's church in this place. Thomas Merton says a Christian is a man or woman "who lives completely out of himself/herself in Christ."^[3] In other words, we want to live so much for Christ that his goals become our goals and we thereby lose our life and regain it more fully in him. It's complicated. It's beautiful.

And people of every generation earnestly pray to God asking that God bless us, galvanize our will, strengthen our hearts, fill us with grace, inspire our thinking, guide our sometimes crooked steps, and help us, help us *to be the church of Jesus Christ.*

What a holy journey. I'm glad we're on it together. And that Jesus walks with us every step of the way.

AMEN.

[\[1\]](#) Our basement was dug out in the 1930s.

[\[2\]](#) And I'll be waiting on the far side banks of Jordan
I'll be sitting drawing pictures in the sand

And when I see you coming I will rise up with a shout
reaching for your hand. *(written by Terri Smith, recorded by many, including Johnny Cash)*

[\[3\]](#) p. 38 *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton, as conveyed in a letter from Don Shult, January 2020.