



Ben Blobaum's Sermon

MAY 7, 2023

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

GOD CHOSE US

I'm going to guess that most, if not all, of us have at some point heard someone say, "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian," or have heard some variation of this expression. But is it true? Can one live as a Christian without participation in the church? To answer that question, let's start with a sports analogy. Can one be a Milwaukee Bucks player if one never shows up for practice, doesn't play in any games, and doesn't have anything to do with the team?

Now, I'm not much of a sports guy, so perhaps you will forgive me for not knowing until this week that one of the best NBA players in history currently plays right here in town for our Milwaukee Bucks. Perhaps you'll also forgive me for having no idea how to pronounce his name: Giannis Antetokounmpo. How 'bout we just call him Giannis? Giannis has quite a remarkable story – born in Greece to Nigerian immigrant parents, he was signed by the Bucks and moved to the U.S. when he was just eighteen, and he quickly distinguished himself as one of the best players in the league. Now, at age twenty-eight, Giannis is already one of the most decorated players in the history of the NBA. Giannis's accomplishments in basketball are dazzling. But he would have attained none of them apart from belonging to the team. If Giannis attempted to be a team of one, to take on NBA teams all by himself, I doubt he'd ever make it to the hoop (well, maybe against the Pistons).

Here's the point: as talented as he is, apart from the team, Giannis is a nobody. Without belonging to the team, none of what Giannis has accomplished would have been possible. But Giannis isn't a team of one; he's a Milwaukee Buck. And because Giannis is a Milwaukee Buck, he goes to team practice, shows up for games, and actively participates as a member the team. If Giannis didn't do any of these things, it's not clear how we could say in any meaningful way that he was, indeed, a Milwaukee Buck. Can one be a Milwaukee Buck without having anything to do with the team? If so, I'm going to request a salary.

Now, being a Christian is fundamentally different than being a NBA player. But in our epistle reading for today, the Apostle Peter seems to take it for granted that being a Christian entails belonging to the church, in much the same way that being a Milwaukee Buck entails belonging to the team. In our reading, Peter is defining Christian identity; he's telling Christians who they are and what it means to be a Christian. And the first thing to note is that all the words that Peter uses to define Christian identity signify corporate, or collective, realities.

Listen again: "you are a chosen *race*." He doesn't say, "you are chosen individuals." Next, Peter says, "you are a royal *priesthood*." The "hood" in priesthood signifies belonging to a larger whole. Like, to live in a *neighborhood* means that you belong to a larger body of neighbors. Peter could have said, "you are royal *priests*," but he chooses instead the collective noun, "priesthood," to signify the corporate reality of Christian identity.

Peter continues, "you are a holy *nation*." A nation is, by definition, a body of people who are united in what they share in common. Here again, Peter could have said, "you are holy persons," referring to each of his readers individually, but he is unwavering in his definition of Christian identity as a corporate reality.

And finally, and most intimately, Peter says, "you are God's own *people*." In the Greek, the noun Peter uses here is singular, referring not to multiple people but to one, single *body* of people. "Once you were no people," Peter explains, "but now you are God's people," God's *one* people (v. 10).

Every noun that Peter uses to define Christian identity, to define what it means to be a Christian, refers to a collective body. For the Apostle Peter, one is a Christian insofar as one belongs to a larger whole, namely, the church. What is the church? Our English word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which, translated literally, means “a called-out assembly or congregation.” Physical presence and togetherness is right there in the definition of “church.” The church, in other words, is the whole body of those who have been called out of the world and now *assemble together* as a newly constituted people.

Which is precisely the reality that Peter depicts in our reading. In verse 9 he says, *[God] called you out of darkness and into his marvelous light*. A called-out assembly – that’s what the church is. The church is that particular community that has been called out of the world by the gospel and now assembles together at this [*pointing] Table to share this holy Meal.

I want to give you one more Greek word. The English word that we use to refer to all the elements of our worship service is “liturgy.” Everything that we do in our weekly worship services – the prayers, the hymns, the reading of God’s word, the sermon, Holy Communion, etc., all of these constitute the liturgy. Our English word “liturgy” comes from the Greek word *leitourgia*, which, translated literally, means “the work of the people.” The liturgy is not the exclusive work of the pastor, but the work of the whole assembly.

Everything about the worship service presupposes an assembled community – the Scripture readings are read aloud to *hearers*; the sermon is preached to *hearers* and is ratified by their “amen” in reply; the confession of the Creed is not a private, individual statement of belief, but is the confession of the *church’s* faith. Above all, Holy Communion is a communal meal. That’s the very definition of *communion* – a sharing together in unity.

Ekklesia and *leitourgia*, from which we get the English words “church” and “liturgy,” both signify a corporate reality, a people called out of the world of darkness by the gospel and assembled by the Holy Spirit around the Lord’s Table in his glorious, eternal light. There are, of course, circumstances that can prevent a person from regular participation in the assembly. If Giannis suffers an injury, for example, he isn’t kicked off the team, but the expectation is that he will return and resume play after recovering from the injury.

Likewise, there are circumstances, such as illness or infirmity, that can inhibit a Christian’s physical presence in the assembly. But these circumstances are *imposed* on persons and are categorically different from a Christian who is otherwise perfectly capable of joining the assembly but simply chooses not to. So, without discounting special circumstances, what we’re talking about this morning is what constitutes *normative* Christian identity and living. If being a Christian means nothing more than believing in Jesus, then indeed one need not participate in the church.

But that reductionistic definition of a Christian is nowhere found in the Bible. Instead, the entire witness of Scripture takes for granted that to belong to God in Christ Jesus is to belong to his *people*. Christians are called out of the world, not to live a life of private belief in Jesus, but, as Peter says, “that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The church is called out of the world, but is then sent right back in, to call more sinners out of the world through proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In other words, the church is called out of the world *for the sake of the world*, to both warn the world of the coming Judgment and to testify to God’s saving act in Christ. As Holy Communion is God’s sacrament for the church, so is the church God’s sacrament for the world – by its very existence as a visible, public, set apart community, the church is a tangible sign and sacrament to the world of the salvation of God.

Christians are not called out of the world for private belief; to be a Christian is to be given a *vocation*, a calling, to worship and to proclaim the cross and empty tomb, and, so, to confess publicly before the world that Jesus is Lord. And if you think we can withstand the devil, keep the faith, and live the Christian vocation all on your own, then the devil has already got us deceived.

The Milwaukee Bucks might not be as great without Giannis, but, make no mistake, Giannis would be a *nobody* without the Bucks. He has accomplished great things only by playing with the team; you and I will faithfully accomplish our holy calling only by remaining in the church.

The mission of the church is to invite the nations to join us for the Feast at the Altar. And I simply don't see how we can invite others to join us for a Meal if we are not at the Table. Don't misunderstand me, going to church is not what saves you; we are indeed saved and justified by faith alone. But if we are to *abide* in faith to the end, we simply will not make it apart from the church.

Let's close with the Good News, shall we? How did Giannis become a Milwaukee Buck? The truth is that there is *nothing* Giannis could do to make himself a member of the team. On the contrary, he was *drafted* by the Bucks. In NBA terminology, that means he was *chosen* by the Bucks to play for their team. Even if Giannis asked to be on the team, the decision would still be entirely in the hands of the team's owners. Nothing that Giannis did made him a Milwaukee Buck. Giannis is a Milwaukee Buck only because the Bucks *chose* him and offered him a spot on the team.

In bondage to sin, there was *nothing* that you or I could do to find favor with God and make ourselves members of his people. On the contrary, we were helplessly under the power of darkness. We would *not* have chosen to become God's people, because we hated God, and our hatred of him was fully revealed when we nailed God to the cross. We did not choose God; God chose us. "You are a *chosen* race," St. Peter declares, "once you were no people but now you are God's people... built into a spiritual house" (vv. 5; 9-10). A house cannot build itself; only a Builder can do that. Nothing for which you or I can take credit is the basis for our inclusion in God's people.

Nothing that you or I did makes us a Christian. We are Christians only by receiving in faith what Christ has done for us. Standing between us and hell there is only the cross of Christ. We are God's people only and entirely by the free gift of God, through his crucified and risen Son.

It is sheer gift; it is sheer, amazing grace.

And all God's people said...

Amen.