

**What is Church?**

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John 2:13-22

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I don't know the source of the following story. It came to me sometime ago and I kept it, knowing that someday I could use it. I think it answers the question "What is Church?"

THE OLD PHONE

When I was quite young, my father had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember the polished, old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I was too little to reach the telephone, but used to listen with fascination when my mother talked to it.

Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person. Her name was "Information Please" and there was nothing she did not know. "Information Please" could supply anyone's number and the correct time.

My personal experience with the genie-in-a-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer, the pain was terrible, but there seemed no point in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy.

I walked around the house sucking my throbbing finger, finally arriving at the stairway. The telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool in the parlor and dragged it to the landing. Climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. "Information, please" I said into the mouthpiece just above my head.

A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear.

"Information."

"I hurt my finger..." I wailed into the phone, the tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

"Isn't your mother home?" came the question.

"Nobody's home but me," I blubbered.

"Are you bleeding?" the voice asked.

"No," I replied. "I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts."

"Can you open the icebox?" she asked.

I said I could.

"Then chip off a little bit of ice and hold it to your finger," said the voice.

After that, I called "Information Please" for everything. I asked her for help with my geography, and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me my pet chipmunk that I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, our pet canary, died. I called, "Information Please," and told her the sad story. She

listened, and then said things grown-ups say to soothe a child. But I was not consoled. I asked her, "Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?"

She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, "Paul always remember that there are other worlds to sing in." Somehow I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone, "Information Please."

"Information," said in the now familiar voice. "How do I spell fix?" I asked.

All this took place in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. When I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. "Information Please" belonged in that old wooden box back home and I somehow never thought of trying the shiny new phone that sat on the table in the hall. As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really left me.

Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle. I had about a half-hour or so between planes. I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please."

Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well, "Information."

I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell fix?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now."

I laughed, "So it's really you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time?"

I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your call meant to me. I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do", she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later, I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered, "Information." I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?" she said.

"Yes, a very old friend," I answered.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part-time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago."

Before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute, did you say your name was Paul?" "Yes." I answered.

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you."

The note said, "Tell him there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant.

#### REFLECTIION

Church is not institutions or organizations. Church is a relationship of people held together by the compassion of Jesus, our Christ. The very word church can help us remember this. In the middle of the word are the letters "ur." You are the church. On each side of "ur" are the letters "ch" which we can take to stand for Christ. So church is you and me surrounded by Christ.

Church then is a little boy cared for by "information please" with the tenderness of Christ. Every time compassion happens between people, it is church. Now, with this understanding of Church, let us return to today's scripture.

Jesus chased the capitalists from the temple. At the time the temple in Jerusalem was believed to be the dwelling place of God. And by the laws given to Moses (or so the Levites, the priests said) God had certain ritual ways to be approached. The way to God required the purchase of sheep, cattle or doves. And of course not everyone had the right coins so the money changers, for a small fee, would assist.

It was all perfectly legitimate; it was by the laws of Moses. You can still find these ritual spiritual laws described in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

There is, of course, a place in the world for selling but for Jesus it is not the temple and it is not God. For Jesus, a relationship with God is not bought by ritual and animal sacrifice. For Jesus God's mercy and attention are not for sale; they are free, they are gift and they are grace. To speak with "information please" we need only speak, there is no charge, no ritual, no right prayer necessary.

When Jesus entered the temple he was not thinking of the ritual laws, but of the love of God which forgives, teaches and heals. He may even have been thinking of the prophet Micah when who wrote:

With what shall I come before the Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?...

(God) has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:6, 8)

For Jesus God is not about temples and ritual. God is about servant, compassionate and just love. So when Jesus says you can tear this temple down he is not talking about the building, church is not the building. Jesus is talking about his and our relationship with God. He is thinking of his own body and ours, his prayers and ours. Church is about being the body of Christ together.

And indeed three days after they tear down Jesus, after they destroyed the temple he was, the temple was raised. It was raised in Jesus who was resurrected. And it was raised in the Body of Christ, the true church of the men and women who follow Jesus.

Just as God is not the ritual or the building, not the organization or its committees, the church is not these things either. When we join the church we join the body of people committed to following Jesus' way and understanding which is compassionate caring and work for justice. When we join the church we do not unite with an institution but we unite with others of like mind and heart to be transformed by the Holy Spirit and to be the agents of transformation in a crying world.

Church is the living presence of Christ that surrounds us and dwells within us. Church is the relationships we have with companions on the journey. Church is a baptism/washing with forgiveness and power. Church is a common meal where God feeds the hungry. Church is not the songs but the singing together. Church is not the prayers but the praying together. Church is a community of believers; dedicated to forgiveness, to the teaching and healing of Jesus, open to the work of the Holy Spirit and in praise of the Creator.

The church is the resurrected Body of Christ in the world.

The church is the person who answers the phone when information is needed about a hurt finger, how to spell "fix," and when a favorite pet dies; the person who with compassionate love listens. The church reminds us that in the worst of times, "there are other worlds to sing in" today and forever.

Shalom and Amen.