

“What’s the purpose of church?”  
 Proper 25B (October 28, 2018)  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

On Thursday BuzzFeed circulated a silly poll called “Would you rather: Candy Corn Edition.”<sup>1</sup> I came across it on Twitter. It seemed like an interesting way to spend about 60 seconds of my life, so, I participated in the poll. It’s a kind of game structured around a basic question: would you rather eat candy corn or some other food? There were nine questions in this poll. Would you rather eat candy corn or black licorice? I, and 85% of poll participants voted for candy corn. Would you rather eat candy corn or cilantro? I, and 32% of participants voted for cilantro. Would you rather eat candy corn or raw chicken? 97% of participants voted for the candy corn, including me; I’m not sure who the 3% were that opted for the raw chicken. Would you rather eat candy corn or mayonnaise? I chose the candy corn, along with 77% of participants. Would you rather eat candy corn or blue cheese? I opted for the blue cheese, but 79% of participants chose candy corn. Candy corn or moldy bread? I was with the 97% majority, who chose candy corn. Again, not sure who the 3% were that chose the moldy bread - perhaps folks who really hate candy corn. Would you rather eat candy corn or olives? I chose olives with a third of participants. Would you rather eat candy corn or pineapple on pizza? This question had a majority opting for the pizza, including me. And the final question was: would you rather eat candy corn or wet cat food? An overwhelming 98% of participants chose the candy corn, including me. But 2% of die hards - probably candy corn-haters or people just trying to mess with the results - chose the wet cat food.

On the surface, there seems to be no clear purpose to such polls except to provide an opportunity to be silly for a minute or so of your life. Back in 2014, Summer Anne Burton gave an interview that explained the viral success of BuzzFeed polls.<sup>2</sup> Summer Anne Burton led the team at BuzzFeed that discovered how popular such polls could be. In January of 2014, the team came up with a poll titled “What city should you actually live in?” It quickly became, and remains, one of BuzzFeed’s most viral polls of all time, and the team began creating similar polls and circulating them on social media platforms. Polls like: Where should your next vacation be? What age are you really? What career should you actually have? What kind of dog are you? Which ‘Friends’ character are you? Which Harry Potter character are you? Which Disney Princess are you? Each poll is like a 60 second Myers-Briggs Personality test. When you get the results of your poll, explained Summer Anne Burton, it tells you something about yourself, and tells you something about what matters to you. “The most successful [polls],” she says, “are built so that the results feel personal.” These polls, she says, are “a way for people to identify and relate to others,” and feel like they’re part of something bigger than themselves.

One thing scholars of religion are trained to do is to identify features in the world of culture - such as BuzzFeed polls - that have traits that are also shared in the world of religion. Such comparisons tell us something about ourselves - tell us something about why we do this thing called “religion.” You’ve heard me use this tactic of comparison in sermons. Just in this

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.buzzfeed.com/sarahaspler/would-you-rather-candy-corn-edition>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/20/buzzfeed-quiz-how-do-they-work\\_n\\_4810992.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/20/buzzfeed-quiz-how-do-they-work_n_4810992.html)

calendar year's sermons, you've heard me compare baptism to lyrics from the Phish song *Free*; cold shower therapy to the prophet Jonah; the TV series *Breaking Bad* to demon possession; Elon Musk's Tesla in space to the Transfiguration of Jesus; Christopher Hitchens' article on the Limits of Self Improvement to temptation; wellness gurus and kale-garlic-ginger smoothies to salvation; and lyrics from *Linkin Park* songs to the Psalms. Our church's confirmation class is built around this same model: comparing Harry Potter to the Christian tradition. In a recent blog post that examined the challenges of interpretation,<sup>3</sup> scholar of religion Steven Ramey used this same model when he examined the challenge of interpreting the meaning of the word "God" in lyrics from a Boy George song. Scholar Jonathan Z. Smith made his career doing comparison. And his work helped him come up with a definition of "religion": "Religion," he wrote, "is the [human] quest ... to [create] space in which to meaningfully dwell." Religion, he said, helps us see that our "existence matters."<sup>4</sup> I suppose this is a bit like taking a BuzzFeed poll. BuzzFeed polls, said Summer Anne Burton, generate results that feel personal; they help us identify and relate to others; they help us see, in a small way, that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. I think we could replace the phrase "Buzzfeed polls" in each of these statements with the word "religion": *religion* is personal; *religion* helps us identify and relate to others; *religion* helps us see that we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

In today's Psalm, the writer uses a similar tactic of comparison. The Psalmist looks out over the physical and cultural worlds and culls words and images that can be compared with God. "God is a refuge and strength," writes the Psalmist. This is "mighty fortress" language, like that of today's first hymn penned by Protestant Reformer Martin Luther. God in the Psalms is frequently likened to a place. "You are my hiding place," wrote one Psalmist. "You are a stronghold," wrote another. The Bible will often list attributes of God: God is love; God is merciful and just; God is good; God is nurturing like a mother hen. But in today's reading, the attributes of God come by way of metaphor. God is a place, says the Psalmist. God is a space. God is protection and shelter with the firm foundation and stone-upon-stone walls of a fortress. God is a place of safety to house us during the storms of life - life's quaking mountains and roaring, foaming seas. In the midst of the storm, God is a refuge.

What I appreciate about comparison is its open-ended creativity. What if we replaced the word "God" in this Psalm with the word "church?" Church is a spiritual refuge and a strength. Church is a spiritual stronghold - a mighty fortress. Church is a hiding place of spiritual safety. Church offers protection and shelter with a firm spiritual foundation and walls to house us when the mountains of life quake and the seas of life roar and foam.

The title of today's sermon on this Reformation Sunday that is also the kick-off of Stewardship season is "What's the purpose of church?" One purpose, I think, is its Psalm 46 purpose: it's a refuge and a strength. Church is an ever-present help in times of trouble, but also present in times of celebration. Church is a rock and foundation that secures spiritual footing through all of life's transitions: church is here when our babies are born and baptized; church is here when our children are confirmed; church is here for our weddings, our divorces, our surgeries, when we lose our jobs or get hired in new ones, when our nests are emptied as children move on, when our careers come to a close; it's a rock for us when a loved one passes away or our lives on earth come to an end. One clergy friend of mine

<sup>3</sup> <https://edge.ua.edu/steven-ramey/what-does-god-mean/>

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 291.

summarized the role of church through all of life's transitions in this way: church will baptize, marry, and bury.

But church is more than just a refuge, more than just a strength, more than just a stronghold. Church, as St. Paul writes in today's reading from his Letter to the Romans, is also a place of transformation - a place where we can be transformed within these walls, and make a transforming impact in the world outside our walls. Protestant Reformer John Calvin wrote in the sixteenth century that church is a gathering of saints who take the "benefits God confers upon them, [and] share them with [others.]"<sup>5</sup> Or, to put that differently: church is not just for us; its purpose is bigger and broader. This building - this space that is a refuge and stronghold - is like a cup being constantly filled with God's spirit, but filled to overflowing so that this same spirit spills out through us into our community and world. When St. Paul speaks of transformation to those ancient Christians living in Rome, the Greek word he uses is where we get our word "metamorphosis" from. It's butterfly language. Church, when it's at its best, is a place where a person can be transformed, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis - a place where each of us can see and appreciate our colorful uniqueness and beauty, and then be free to spread our wings and live differently in our world.

In today's reading, St. Paul unpacks this butterfly purpose of the church in two ways. First, he writes about gifts. He compares the church to a body with many members. It's like a team where every person has a role. Reformer John Calvin called church a "society." Paul lists seven gifts - seven parts of this body. It's not a literal number, but a figurative one; seven is the number of completeness in scripture. This society, this team, this body has some who are like prophets, and unafraid to speak truth. Church has caregivers with gifts for ministering to the suffering. Church has teachers, who train our children and adults. Church has comforters, who show mercy to the bereaved. Church has people who are good with money, and who are good at asking people to give money. Church has leaders. Church has people filled with compassion. Elsewhere in Paul's letters, he speaks of each gift - each member of the body - as being as essential as an eye or a hand. Every person has a gift; every person has a skill. And every skill - from comforting and caring and teaching to singing and managing money and speaking truth and laboring with our hands - every gift, every skill is essential to the church's purpose. When Paul speaks about the butterfly purpose of the church - church as a place of transformation - he begins by saying that each of us is unique; each of us has a purpose; each of us adds our own butterfly color to this place. Everyone matters here.

But church transforms us in another way. Paul writes first about our gifts. But then he writes about our values. Church transforms our values as human beings. Church provides a moral framework for us to make a difference in our world. Paul lists a series of values at the end of today's reading: let love be genuine; resist what is evil; cling to what is good; love one another; honor one another; be uplifted by God's spirit; be hopeful; be patient when you suffer; pray often; give to those in need; show an extravagant welcome to strangers and aliens; and strive to be at peace with all people. Love. Distinguishing good from evil. Hope. Patience. Prayer. Compassion. Welcome. Peace. This is a vision of church at its very best. Yes, it's a Psalm 46 refuge during life's storms. Yes, it's a place of transformation, where we see ourselves and our unique gifts as essential and beautiful. But it's also a place where our values are transformed, so we can make the world a better place.

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<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.3.

There has never been in my little over 40 years of life a more urgent time than the present to reinforce this purpose of the church. Fear of “others” is being stoked by the highest offices in our land, and the devastating product of such rhetoric can be seen in yesterday’s shooting at Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh, in bombs sent in the mail this week, and in the terrible things being said about transgender people and about “migrant caravans” in Mexico. Yesterday afternoon, leaders in our denomination - the United Church of Christ - put out a letter.<sup>6</sup> I want to close today by reading a portion of it to you: In response to these events this week, they write, love is not an “emotional response,” but a “collective resolve”:

Love that refuses to be consumed by hate. Love that removes the barriers between our faiths and our fears. Love that causes us to see the Divine in one another and, having seen what is holy in the other, refuses to let hate win. Love that demands accountable and respectful speech from those in authority. Love that demands sensible gun control in a country that has lost its way. Love that says when one hurts we all hurt, when one grieves, we all grieve, when one is unsafe, we all are unsafe. Love that gives life and refuses to let hate breathe.

The United Church of Christ stands with our Jewish siblings today in that love as we mourn this terrible tragedy in our midst. And we will not run. We will not hide. We will not shy away from confronting the toxic, white Christian supremacy that is masquerading as faith. We are here with you. We are praying with you. We are mourning with you. And we are loving with you until every street and every synagogue and every mosque and every sanctuary is free of hate. We are with you until love wins, and this is a just world for all. This is our collective faith. This is our collective hope. This is our collective love. And the greatest of these is love.

...As you prayerfully consider your stewardship gift this year, I would urge you to keep in mind that you’re not just supporting this local church as a Psalm 46 refuge. And you’re not just supporting this local church as it strives to be a place of transformation inside and outside our walls. You’re also supporting a certain vision of the world. A vision where love instead of hate wins. Amen.

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