

**Sermon Week 1** **– Why Church**

***John 20:19-29
Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (v21 NIV)***

There can be lots of different reasons why people go to church or connect with a church community. For some, it could be something they were taught to do as a child and have continued throughout their adult life. Some might find a sense of purpose in being involved in one way or another. For other people, church might mean catching up with friends, a connection to the history of the congregation, a desire to keep the doors open, or wanting to be involved in God’s work at a local, district or churchwide level.

Have you ever wondered what God’s purpose is for his church? We can explore lots of reasons why church is important to us, but have you ever thought about why God wants his church to exist and flourish?

One Bible passage we can look to for some insight into God’s purpose for his church is John 20:18-30. This story occurs on the evening of Jesus’ resurrection when he appeared to his disciples who had gathered in a room behind locked doors. They were worried that the same people who had crucified their Teacher three days earlier would come after them too. They were surprised when Jesus suddenly stood among them. Jesus greeted them by saying, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then, after showing them the wounds in his hands and his side, Jesus repeated his greeting and said, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you’ (John 20:21 NLT).

The way Jesus greeted his disciples was significant. These were the people who had abandoned him when he was arrested, denied him when he was put on trial, and left him for dead when he was crucified. When Jesus appeared to them in that room, however, he didn’t get angry with them, he didn’t condemn them, and he didn’t even ask them why they ran away. Instead, he proclaimed peace to them.

When Jesus spoke peace to his disciples, he used the Greek form of the Old Testament word *shalom*. S*halom* peace means wholeness, harmony, and completeness. By greeting the disciples with this *shalom* peace, Jesus forgave the disciples for what they had done and restored his relationship with them. In making peace with them, Jesus also made their broken relationships with the Father and with each other whole and complete again.

Jesus speaks his *shalom* peace to us as well. In the same way that he proclaimed *shalom* peace to his disciples in that room on the evening of the resurrection, he establishes *shalom* peace in our lives by reconciling us with our heavenly Father through his death and resurrection for us.

Jesus also gives us *shalom* peace in ourselves as he frees us from the burden of sin, guilt, and death, making us whole and complete through faith in him. No matter what conflicts we might be experiencing, what brokenness we might be suffering, what we feel might be missing on our lives, Jesus comes to gift us with his *shalom* peace so we can find peace with God, within ourselves, and in our relationships with others.

God gifts us with his *shalom* peace as an act of grace. The disciples didn’t do anything to earn or deserve the peace Jesus spoke to them on that resurrection evening. Jesus gave them his peace because he knew that was what they needed. In the same way, he gives us his *shalom* peace as an act of real grace. Everything that is needed to establish peace in our relationships with God, with others, and even within ourselves was accomplished when Jesus gave his life for us on the cross and burst the tomb open on the morning of the resurrection.

We live in the reality of the *shalom* peace Jesus gives when we give real grace to and receive it from others. We find God’s real grace in his Word and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. God’s grace also becomes real to us when we receive it from sisters and brothers who share our faith. It becomes real in other people’s lives, too, when we show God’s grace to them. Real grace gives us *shalom* peace as we learn to trust God’s grace to us in Jesus, and as we learn to show that same grace to others.

We can find the *shalom* peace Jesus gives in all of life’s circumstances. We all have good times and bad times, joys and struggles, happiness and heartbreaks. Real grace means that we can be honest with God, other people, and ourselves about what is happening in our lives in the faith that our sisters and brothers in Christ will respond to us with grace and *shalom* peace. We don’t have to pretend to God, to others, or even to ourselves that life is OK or that we have it all together because of God’s real grace to us in Jesus. When we are real about our lives to others in the church, we encounter God’s grace in a tangible way. Grace becomes much more than a theological idea. It becomes a lived reality when we are real about our lives with each other, and we share God’s *real* grace with each other.

Real grace makes a massive difference in our lives as we learn to live in the way Jesus taught. We can become more accepting of others. We can forgive more easily. We can love other people, even those who might be difficult to love. The *shalom* peace Jesus gives helps us cope with challenges, difficulties and disappointments in our lives as we learn to trust in God’s grace to us in Jesus. The Apostle Paul describes the difference God’s real grace makes to our lives when he talks about the Spirit producing fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in us (Galatians 5:22,23). These gifts from God become real in our lives as we grow in our faith and in trusting God’s real grace to us in Jesus.

God’s grace becomes real when we live it out in community. We can only follow Jesus’ command to love others in the way that he loved us (John 13:34) when we are living it out in our relationships with other people.

Learning to love one another in the way that Jesus loved us is at the heart of church as a real community. It helps us to experience God’s real grace as we show Christ-like love to each other. A faith community gives us a context in which we can learn to show real grace to others by seeing it modelled in other peoples’ lives. Real community also gives us the freedom to learn how to show grace to others because when we get it wrong or mess up in some way, people will be ready and willing to show real grace to us when we need it. When we participate in a community of faith, we can find God’s *shalom* peace as we are surrounded with loving, grace-filled people to support us, encourage us, and provide for us, in the same way that we can help others find *shalom* peace by showing them real grace for the reality of their lives.

God intends his church to be a place where we encounter the *shalom* peace of Jesus as we find real grace for our real lives in real community. When we go back to Jesus’ words to his disciples on the evening of the resurrection in John 20:21-29, God has one more planned purpose for his church. Jesus said, ‘As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you’ (v21 NLT). Jesus’ purpose for his church is to bring his *shalom* peace to the world.

We live in a world that is fractured and broken by sin, hate, greed, and all kinds of wrongs. These wrongs are tearing people’s lives apart, destroying relationships, creating an epidemic of loneliness, and leaving people feeling hopeless. God gives us the remedy to the world’s pain in the good news of Jesus. In the same way that our heavenly Father sent his Son into the world to give us his *shalom* peace through his death and resurrection, Jesus sends us into the world to share his *shalom* peace with everyone we meet.

When we embrace people with real grace, whatever their real lives might be like, and invite them to be part of a real community of faith, people can meet Jesus in us, hear his words of *shalom* peace, and find everything their hearts are aching for in him. By being a church that practises real grace for real life in real community, we can share God’s goodness with all people so they can find God’s deep and lasting *shalom* peace through us.

There can be lots of different reasons why people go to church or connect with a church community. Over the next few weeks, we will be exploring an understanding of church which might challenge some of our thinking about church and God’s purpose for his church. We will look at what it means to be giving and receiving real grace through faith in Jesus, how this real grace connects with and shapes our real lives, as we are embraced and embrace others in real community. All of this is done in the *shalom* peace Jesus gives us as he sends us into a broken and messed up world to bring his *shalom* peace to others. Amen.