

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**  
**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • SEPTEMBER 20, 2020**  
**“WIDE-OPEN SPACES”**

**Song of Focus**  
**“God’s Temple”**  
**Words and Music by Ed Varnum**

*Refrain:*

May the grace of Christ Jesus and the love of our God,  
the communion of Spirit unite you as one.  
For you are God’s temple, its foundation the Word,  
with Christ Jesus as your cornerstone.

As Christ’s grace receives you, God’s love will fill you.  
The Spirit indwells you, God’s temple, God’s home.  
Together the church, united as one,  
is God’s temple, Christ the cornerstone.

*Refrain:*

May the grace of Christ Jesus and the love of God,  
the communion of Spirit unite you as one.  
For you are God’s temple, the foundation the Word,  
with Christ Jesus as your cornerstone.

Yes, you are God’s temple, its foundation the Word,  
with Christ Jesus as your cornerstone.

**The Scripture**  
**2 Corinthians 13:5-13**

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? —unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed.*

*But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. For we rejoice when we are weak, and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect. So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.*

*Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet*

*one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*

**The Message**  
***Wide-Open Spaces: Just Where Is the Church?***  
**Mark Briley**



2601 W. Broadway. That's where you are right now. Some city planners, at some point, got together to organize Columbia and work with surveyors and longitude and latitude coordinates and compare residential and commercial plans... where that apartment building would go, where our church might be and also the PetSmart.

2601 W. Broadway. I name the address fairly often actually. I'll be talking to someone, and they find out I'm a pastor. If that doesn't scare them away, they ask, "*Where's your church?*" And I'll say, "*2601 W. Broadway – just a couple blocks west of Stadium on Broadway.*" "*Sort of by that Wal-Mart and Hy-Vee?*" they sometimes respond. "*Yep. Not far.*" "*Okay... I know exactly where your church is.*" These days, that conversation almost always leads to the follow up question: "*So are you open or what?*" In these quarantined months, there has become a big national to-do about whether or not the church is "*open.*" Some would point to the old childhood rhyme with hand motions that many of us learned in Sunday School: "*Here is the church. Here is the steeple. Open the door and here's all the people.*" That's what it means for the church to be open, some say. But the push back was swift? "*Isn't the church more than a building? More than a location? The church never **closed**, right?*"

What do you say? Just where is the church anyway? Every person has a thought about this whether it's a deep care for the institutional church or a whimsical, "*I don't care to give church a second thought at all.*" Some of this is deeply personal. Some will talk about their childhood and say, "*We were in church every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night.*" There were no other options. You sat on the third pew, held the hymnal for grandma and placed bets with your brother about which verse the organist was going to slide off that newly polished organ bench. Always bet the fourth verse – churches always skip the third verse and that fourth verse is generally where they literally pull out all the stops.

Many speak of these experiences as a disciplined experience of church. It was structure, a constant and a habit that was formative. Others were burned by the church ... either tired of being forced to go by some parental type or rejected by the judgment that was spewed from the pulpit which didn't seem to be reinforced by what Jesus gave his energy to. Sometimes people grab onto the '*spiritual but not religious*' clause – down with Jesus but no need of a hypocritical institution. Generalizing generations is never totally fair but sometimes rings true. Some note the Greatest Generation as experiencing church in a dutiful way – God and Country sort of spirit – very practical and destination oriented. It's the hard work put in today to get to the end game of a someday salvation. I've had the privilege of doing a number of memorial services for the Greatest Generation, and so often the stories are similar – got married young on the way off to war. Came back and worked the same job for 50 years, married to same person for 60, and been an elder in the same church all those many years. Some truly amazing people.

Some Boomers embraced this idea of Church, and some pushed back as the Social Gospel of the '60s and '70s captured their imaginations – broad stroke freedom for all. Lived through many a church split it seems. Jesus' one prayer request in the big prayer passage in John's Gospel before the arrest and crucifixion went down was for unity. Can you imagine being in a circle with Jesus, and the small group leader asks at the end of the gathering, "*Any prayer requests?*" And Jesus pipes up – "*Yeah, I got one.*" You'd perk up a bit wouldn't you? And Jesus would say, "*That my people may be one.*" He prays to God, "*May they be one as you and I are one.*" But humans tend to split it seems.

You may have heard the story of the guy lost and alone on a deserted island for a decade. When a rescue boat finally came ashore, they found the man all by himself. They also discovered three huts. They asked the man, "*Hey, you're here by yourself, right?*" "Yes," the man said. "*Why three huts?*" The man responded, "*Oh, well. That first hut is where I live. That second hut is where I go to church. And that third hut is where I used to go to church.*" Even when we're by ourselves, unity isn't easy. Just where is the church?

Gen Xer's moved from that sense of Church to a more local, deeply personal theology of liberation. They had a skeptical eye on abstract theories, bloated institutions, government and political policies that most often let them down. Xers wanted to fix what seemed fixable, beginning with their own mess, and moving out to what is tangible, reachable, touchable, and local. *Just where is the church?*

Millennial's were less interested in brand loyalty – didn't need to stick it out denominationally just because that's where the family landed for generations. While their grandparents kept telling them to be concerned about life after death, they were more interested in knowing if there was life before death. Church was more of a

spiritual smorgasbord – pick up a little from here for a while, over there for that practical class, or simply glean a spiritual truth from a church podcast a friend shared with them that they could listen to while they went for a run on the Katy Trail and work an NPR fundraising marathon as a way to give back. *Just where is the church?*

These broad strokes don't apply to every person in every generational group, but just some generalizations that may have some consistent merit to them. No matter your generation, you might find some affinity with any of those approaches to Church. All of us would answer the "*Just where is the church?*" question a bit differently. It's not to say one is more right than the other – but just to realize our context matters. Someone said it like this, "*Where you stand depends on where you sit?*" What does that mean? It means that we don't come to our stances on matters of politics, religion, education or otherwise in a vacuum. We stand for things based on where we sat along the way – our contexts, the people that raised us (*or didn't*), the places we grew up, the experiences we struggled through, the people we were taught to listen to as authorities on any number of things.

We prefer to think everyone has been exposed to the same lessons and contexts and opportunities and experiences that we have and therefore should come to the exact conclusions as we have ourselves – given our journey – how could you not? But the moment we say, "*I can't understand how they could believe that,*" we're talking as much about ourselves as we are the other person. In fact, it's right there in the statement itself: "*I can't understand.*" Maybe there's something "*I*" need to seek to understand first before writing off someone else. It's got to be confusing for young people (*because it is to most of us*)... when it comes to the church. How can *that* church be so different from that *other* church and both of them say "*We're just following Jesus.*"

There was a young man who wrote a letter to Shane Claiborne whose mission outpost, "*The Simple Way*" is trying to cut through all the struggles of institutional church to simply exist in community as a way of being in the world. This late-teens man seeking to uncover just where the church is these days wrote: "*I am alone, surrounded by unbelieving activists and inactive believers. Where are the true Christians?*"

Claiborne's thought? He said, "A "*silent majority*" is developing as a growing number of folks are deliberately distancing themselves from the noise and arrogance that have come to mark both evangelical Christianity and secular activism. In college," one of his professors said, "*Don't let the world steal your soul. Being a Christian is about choosing Jesus and deciding to do something incredibly daring with your life.*"

I hear the struggle... and also the passion. I talk with my daughter and these Good Egg freshmen sitting on the hill today, and they're expressing these sorts of things. Where does Generation Next see the Church in the world? And here we all are... trying to be

the Church in a faithful way. I believe the local church remains the greatest hope for the world. We're listening.... We're trying to express the love of Christ in word and deed – here's who we are... here's what we're trying to be in the world. *Just where is the church?* Especially now as we're living in the wide-open spaces of a pandemic.

The Apostle Paul was about this work. We worked out of his letter to the church at Rome last week as we launched this *Wide-Open Spaces* series. Today, it's his word to the Corinthian church. His first line in today's passage of focus? "*Examine yourselves to see where you are living in the faith.*" We are great at telling other people to examine themselves. "*You better check yourself before you wreck yourself.*" We love that. Paul says, "*No... it's you, yo. Yeah... the one who opened the envelope and is reading this letter right now.*" It's a "*Just where is the church?*" question. How do we examine ourselves? Saying our church is at 2601 W. Broadway isn't the answer to this question. 2601 W. Broadway is just a location. It's really just an airport. It's the physical address or the virtual address where we check in before taking flight. And we don't go to the airport to stay there and hang out forever. We go to the airport only because of the places it can send us.

If the Christians in Corinth were going to examine themselves, they probably dug out and dusted off the Prophet Micah's textbook. What was Micah's great question? "*What does the Lord require of you?*" he asks. And if you look at the back of the book, he put the answer right in there. The answer? "*To do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.*"

Okay, church. We could work with this. Not bad check-in questions for us as individuals and as the church. Are we *doing* justice? Are we working to make life fairer for someone else? Are we killing people with kindness, or are we just killing people? When we leave the presence of another, have we exhausted them? Have we helped or are they left thinking, "*You're killing me smalls?*" And that last one about humility? Are we representing the Church of Jesus Christ with humility, or are we pretty arrogant about how humble we are? Not a bad checklist before you get out of bed in the morning. "*Justice. Kindness. Humility. Fill me with these today, O God.*" That's when the Church starts to be a movement outside the confines of 2601 W. Broadway... or beyond any church address for that matter.

This COVID stuff has forced us to look at the Church in a whole new way. Maybe 'gifted us' is better than 'forced us.' This past Monday night, a masked group of Broadway folks gathered to work on our Vision for the future. As we met, an intercessory prayer group met out in the Outdoor Worship Space to undergird our process in prayer. At the same time, our property team brought their lawn chairs and met out in the parking lot. Taby was in the sanctuary running cords and setting stands for folks to share their gifts of worship leadership. I learned another small group of Broadway women had gathered that night to share their hearts so someone else might

carry their struggle with them. A care team was delivering meals to a family who had lost a loved one. *Just where is the church?* Later that night, I stood in my own driveway with another father who was outside, too. I know their family is bearing some weight right now. We connected eyes in a knowing way acknowledging the hardness of being a dad and longing for our kids to thrive. Later yet, walking our dog while in my pajamas and flip flops, a neighbor who recently lost his mother asked about someone in my family, who is facing a serious illness right now. And there I stood, a pajama'd pastor with doggie bag in hand, experiencing church then and there. Talk about accountability – there's nothing like truly being the church with someone you can see from your back deck. Or it's the five-year-old neighbor boy, who I later learned was sent to me by his mom, with one of the big questions as he asks me out of the blue, "*What does Satan look like?*" "*Well...*" I said. He said, "*I was gonna Google it but mom said I should ask you.*" Same kid who often encourages me, "*Good luck preachin' today.*" He thinks every time I leave the house I'm going to preach. Maybe he's on to something.

*Just where is the church?* It's where we live. It's where we work. It's with our classmates in virtual classrooms. It's on that phone call with a lonely saint of the church, who is cooped up at home like never before. It's with those we love and those we're asked to love even when it's hard. It's taking a virtual walk today to feed hungry people in Columbia and Zambia. It's an encouraging text message that says, "*I see you. I'm with you.*" And you know what we'll find? Some days we are the kingdom of God for someone else and some days they are the kingdom of God for us. And that's not about 2601 W. Broadway. That's not about *going* to church. That's about *being* the church in the wide-open spaces we are called into day in and day out. Jesus' last words to the disciples in Matthew's Gospel we usually translate, "*Go and make disciples*" but it's more accurately translated, "*As you go, make disciples.*" *Just where is the church?* It's '*as you go.*' It's where you are right now and where you'll be an hour from now. It's wherever justice is done, kindness is shared, and where humility elevates the value of another.

*Just where is the church?* It's not so much that old children's exercise of here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and here's all the people. In Paul's parting blessing to the people of Corinth he suggests the church is grace, grounded in love, communing with each other. That's where Church can be found. Paul may buy into the revised saying – a remix of that old Sunday School favorite which reads: "*This is the church; it is the people. Grace, love and One, regardless of steeple.*"

Let's do this, church. We're living in an unprecedented time, and we can be an unprecedented people. We can get down about the many restrictions, or we can say, the Church has overcome the greatest restrictions the world could throw at us and even still, she persisted. The tomb was empty... the Church ... the literal and metaphorical body of Christ was out there... loose in the world. I don't know how this pandemic season ends. It's a wide-open space. But I do know we have the chance to

*“shock the world”* as a friend recently reminded me of the late Muhammad Ali’s quote of confidence. That shockwave of justice, kindness, humble love cannot be contained at 2601 W. Broadway. The next time someone asks you, *“Just where is your church?”* no matter where you might be in the moment, may your first thought be, *“We’re right here. We’re everywhere.”*