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Sermon Title: Church 101
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Romans 12

When my father was a young pastor, he served a Church way up in northern Maine, a little town called Monson near Moosehead Lake. One night there was a gigantic snowstorm—one of those storms that drifted high up against the house, blocking the doors, encasing the whole house. In the middle of the night, a fire broke out, killing most of the family. My father did the funeral. It's haunted him ever since. Six little caskets lined up at the front of the Church. A town beyond grief, shock, and sorrow. Sixty years later, he still calls it the worst day of his life.

My book is dedicated, first and foremost, to our beloved Emma Von Euler, who took her life when she was 16 years old. Emma was a delight in the life of our Church, in the life of our family, in the life of her family, Peter and Nancy and Sarah. With the Von Eulers' permission, I begin my book telling the story of the end of Emma's life, of that night when we were all together in their home, clinging to one another with sobs and sorrow so deep I can feel it today. It was *the worst day of my life*. And yet, midway through the first chapter of my book, I place a subtitle, "The Best Day of My Life," telling the story of our journey from Emma's death to Emma's funeral and beyond.

I tell of the role of Church and faith and prayer and the Morgan Youth Barn and the Memorial Room reception and the Church House offices where people met and Church friends who gathered together. And I tell of this sanctuary and Emma's memorial service, a service of breathtaking beauty, of enormous courage, of profound faith, of extraordinary love, unconditional and perfect; a week in the life of this Church and a service in this Church, doing what only Church can do. At its best.

The role of Church every day, not just on bad days or tragic days or worst days, but every day, the role of Church is to lift our sights, to raise our hopes, to make us better, to make life better than we thought possible. Church always believes in better.

Do you remember 9/11? And 9/12? And the whole week after, as people came to Church night after night, day after day, even hour after hour. Seeking hope. Seeking guidance. Seeking the kind of precious strength unique to Church; seeking to feel better, to be better, to take all our hurts and anger and sorrow and rage and fear and put it all in a better place. Church done right always puts us in a better place.

My sermon title promised you "Church 101," a hint that I'll quickly tell you what Church is, where it came from, how it got to where we are today. Happily for me, that's what our Bible Study has been doing all year. If you read the Book of Acts, you get "Church 101," you'll get Church from zero to 60, from when it was nothing to when it was full throttle. Let me make it simple for you.

1. After Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, there was NO Church, there were no Christians. None of that. Didn't exist. Jesus wasn't a Christian. The disciples didn't go to Church.
2. What you had was a small group of Jewish men and women who believed that Jesus was raised from the dead. AND if Jesus was raised from the dead, that's all the proof needed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God.
3. That small group was 100 percent Jewish. They went to the synagogue, they ate kosher, they weren't Christians, they didn't have a Church.
4. That little group of Jewish believers in Jesus steadily began to grow. They attracted others; they convinced others to believe in Jesus. That little group became a movement.
5. As the movement grew, it spread beyond Jewish people, beyond Israel. Non-Jews took interest, got involved, believed. Pretty soon, they had to decide how Jewish were they—100 percent Jewish? 50 percent? A little? Or something new?
6. Over the course of 20 years, that first generation, the movement of believers in Jesus became their own thing. Other people actually started calling them "Christians," an insult at first, a little sneer, perhaps, but the name stuck. And when Christians gathered together, they were called a gathering, like a town meeting, a public gathering. The Greek word was "Ekklessa," which in English becomes "Church." Presto! We have Church.

St. Paul spent his life traveling the Mediterranean, starting Churches in Syria, Greece, Turkey, Rome, leaving behind little outposts of Christians gathered in Churches. And those early Christians from the first century on were motivated by Jesus's last words on earth, "Go ye into all the world, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, baptizing and teaching all that I have commanded." And so, for 2,000 years, Christians made every effort to plant Churches in every nook and cranny on earth.

Jump ahead to today, and we are everywhere. Underground Churches, clandestine Churches, illegal Churches, grand cathedrals, and little country Churches, mega Churches and house Churches, 31 Churches in Fairfield! We are everywhere; and if we're not careful, nowhere. I wrote *Church: One Pilgrim's Progress* as a love letter to something I love, something I've given my life to, something I'm proud of, something I believe the world needs more than ever: Church, done right.

I'm taking you to the basics, the ground level. Church. Not hierarchies or denominations or creeds. I'm interested in the place where you and I and God intersect. Church. It's my life's work. I live it, I breath it; I love it and believe in it. I believe the Church, THE CHURCH, is our collective soul at work.

Everyone tells us that America is going to heck in a hand basket. All the presidential candidates are telling us what's wrong, vowing to fix things, change things, stop things. They'll do it for us, they'll do it to us, they're all willing to run our lives for us, top down. Church offers to change the world starting *within* each of us, not top down but inside out, beginning inside us. Church exists to make us better parents, better teenagers, better carpenters, and business people and neighbors, better friends and co-workers and teammates, better citizens and siblings and soldiers and peacemakers and conservationists, better people. If we get back on track.

Church got off the track when we got wedded to power. It didn't happen overnight, but once Christianity got power, we began to lose our power. That sounds like a contradiction, but it is true. When Christianity got power—power to control, power to rule, power to abuse—we lost our power to influence, to guide, to love.

Around the year 300, Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Overnight, we went from a small, struggling, sincere, caring, community of believers, to being the power brokers, the power behind the throne, the power, period.

In the centuries ahead, the Church was the king, the Church was the state, the Church was the government, the military, the taxation authority. All that

did was build up centuries of abuse on the one hand and resentment on the other.

Do you realize almost everything we're mad at Islamic terrorists about nowadays, Churches did for centuries? Public executions, morality police, anti-Semitism, oppression of minorities—that was our M.O. for too long. That brings us to America, "American Church 101." America came into being on the shoulders of Church people who did not want Church and state playing their power games together, hand in hand.

For three years now, I've urged you to read John Barry's biography of Roger Williams (*Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*). In fact, if you have to choose between buying my book or the Roger Williams book, buy the Roger Williams one.

Williams, of course, was the founder of Rhode Island, hounded out of Massachusetts by power-hungry (I hate to say it) Congregationalists. Yes, we Congregationalist Pilgrims fled state religion in England only to establish state Congregationalism in New England. Roger Williams rebelled. He escaped to Rhode Island and established the first bastion of true religious freedom of the separation of Church and state in America.

What's revolutionary about Roger Williams is that he's a dyed-in-the-wool Bible believing, evangelical Baptist Christian, and he argues that true separation of Church and state is a blessing for the Church. It allows us freedom, freedom to be the force, the power that Jesus wants us to be. Not power from the top, power from within.

Church is where the best of me meets the best of you to become the best of God. We can do that. What I do is take you through Church life through my life, from the mundane to the heavenly and everything in between. We see Church at its best when we let Scripture connect us to now, when we let worship connect us to God, when we let mission really connect us to people, when we let death connect us to greater life. Along the way, I tell you some stories that defy reason.

In fact, much of my story defies reason, and that's O.K. We're not in the business of reason. We're in the business of faith. Church faith is not anti-reason or anti-science; faith is sort of alongside reason and science. We're friends, we're partners in life; they do their part, we do ours. We're the part that takes you further than can be proven, deeper than can be described, higher than can be touched. We are the adrenaline rush of life, the x factor.

When I was a youth pastor in Massachusetts, a teenage boy in our Church had a horrific motorcycle accident up by Lake Winnepesaukee in New

Hampshire. He flew off his bike and hit a tree head-on. In the middle of the night, I drove to the hospital, got there as the doctor made it clear there was little hope. I snuck into the ER, stood near his bed, watching the doctors and nurses feverishly trying to preserve his life, I was 24. I didn't know anything other than to be scared and pray hard.

Suddenly, I saw a doctor raise his arm high in the air. He held a gigantic needle (looked to me like a sword) and brought it down hard, driving it into that boy's chest. Adrenalin. For the next 6 months, that boy fought to live, but never alone. I would fill my car with teenagers two or three times a week. We rolled into the hospital. He was in one of those halo contraptions screwed into his skull, and he had to be upside-down 12 hours a day. We all had to sit on the floor underneath him so he could see us. And when he came home, healed, whole, alive, the whole Church lined the street to welcome him home to Haverhill, Massachusetts. None of that made any sense. But the doctor did what he did despite the evidence, faith did what faith does despite the odds, and Church did what Church does best: love, and never give up. Not on this life. Not on the next.

This is not a "Pollyanna" book. Church is not perfect. Not this one, not any one. And Lord knows, I am not perfect. But our purpose is perfect. What we aim for, what we try for, what we preach and teach for, that is perfect.

Most of you haven't seen the book cover yet. You've seen the brochure, so you have an idea. We thought long and hard about it. The cover is the copy of a painting given to us a while back. One afternoon some folks from another state stopped by the Church. They had this big painting, found in a relative's house, and asked if we'd like it. It's not exactly realism. It's not quite impressionism. It's idealized, almost ethereal. It's what we often say about our Church, "a little slice of heaven." The doors are wide open, the sun is shining, the trees are blossoming. It is simple and quiet and lovely. You would want to go there.

Now, look at our bulletin cover. Then we're done because we need to sell books! If I don't sell 500 today, Alida will kick me out of the house because of all the boxes of books. But look at that cover. I first saw it months ago in my morning newspaper. You remember last fall, all the refugees pouring across Europe, escaping the horrors of Africa and the Middle East, of Eritrea and Ethiopia, Syria and Libya, into Turkey and Greece, across the Balkans, into Germany and France. Europe, overwhelmed and afraid, but trying. The refugees, afraid and overwhelmed, but trying.

And many of them stopped in Calais, France, migrant camp, a last stop before trying to cross into England. Their past, shattered and lost. Their future, uncertain. In that uncertainty, at those crossroads, the migrants' first

order of business was to build a Church. You see it. A spindly wooden frame, tarp tied over it, a cross on top, and inside, the comforts of faith, images of St. Michael, Mary, and Jesus; prayer books, candles and an altar.

Church. Not perfect. But headed in the right direction. Not that much different from our little Church in 1725.

“Church 101.”

Scriptural Benediction

Romans 12

The Church's One Foundation

Deacon: *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Congregation: ***Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering,***

persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is Church.

We love thy Church, O God.

And now, let's join together to sing our Church's own hymn, written by Timothy Dwight, "I Love Your Church, O God"

*I love your Church, O, God,
On earth your blest abode
the people our Redeemer saved
with his own precious blood.*

*I love your Church, O God.
Whose walls before you stand,
dear as the apple of your eye,
and graven on your hand.*

*In love my tears shall fall;
in love my prayers ascend;
to serve your Church my toils be given,
till toils and cares shall end.*

*Beyond my highest joys
I prize your people's ways:
the sweet communion, solemn vows,
the hymns of love and praise.*

*Sure as your truth shall last,
to Zion shall be given
the brightest glories earth can yield,
and brighter bliss of heaven.*