

What do you love? What you love says a lot about you? Did you see the movie, *Marley and Me* (**picture**)? I did. I was a puddle at the end.

It's the true story of John Grogan (**picture**) and his 97-pound Labrador retriever, *Marley*. He claimed that Marley was the world's worst dog.

Marley crashed through screen doors with alarming regularity, went berserk during thunderstorms, destroying everything in his path. He stole food off the dinner table, slobbered incessantly, drank from the toilet bowl, and ate bath towels, sponges, socks, used tissues, plastic toys, furniture, speaker covers, paychecks, even an expensive gold necklace. He was incorrigible...and utterly lovable. How could his master love a dog that had so many bad qualities? Because he chose to.

The Church of Jesus Christ is like that. We can point out the faults and problems within any church. We can talk about how there are decisions that we don't agree with, people that frustrate us, things going on that we have a problem with, but despite all of its warts and faults, even heinous sins – Jesus loves the Church. Please turn to Ephesians 5:25-27 (p. 979).

This morning before I leave on my Sabbatical, I want to share with you – **Why I love the church...and you should too.**

It's become trendy to say, "I love Jesus, but I don't love the Church." That's like saying, "I love you Scott, but I can't stand your wife." Or, "I love you, but I hate your body." The New Testament says that the Church is the Bride of Christ. So, it's this simple. If you don't love the Church, you don't love Jesus. You can't say that you love me and can't stand my wife. The New Testament says that the Church is the Body of Christ. If you don't love His Body the Church, you don't love Jesus.

Many Christians want to just use the church. Biblically, that's not *use*, it's *abuse*. Jesus loved the Church so much that He died for it. If you want to be like Jesus, you must learn to love the Bride of Christ because the only thing that's going to last is the Church.

This world isn't going to last. It's going to all go up in smoke, but the Church will last for all eternity. Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message* in Ephesians 1:23, "*The church, you see, is not peripheral to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ's body, in which He speaks and acts, by which He fills everything with His presence.*"

No other organization has made as much of a difference as the Church. Revival has never come through government. True change has never come through government. That's why as Christians, we don't need to be focused on the next President, but must be focused on the return of the King. Our hope is not in the man we put in the White House, but in the Man we put on the cross. He's our Savior, not anyone else.

The Church is the most magnificent concept ever created. It's survived persistent abuse, horrifying persecution and widespread neglect. Yet despite its faults (due to our sinfulness), it's still God's chosen instrument of blessing. It has a long history. It's been around for 2,000 years.

It's God's instrument for His ministry here and the greatest force on the face of the Earth. It's why I believe tackling some of the world's greatest problems: spiritual lostness, egocentric leadership, poverty, disease, and ignorance can only be done through the Church of Jesus Christ.

Who do you think is going to really make a difference in this world? The United Nations? Congress? Democrats? Republicans?

This morning I want to share with you several world changing differences and advantages that the Church has over any other group or organization in society. It's the Church of Jesus Christ that has powerful advantages over the efforts of business or government:

**The Church has the largest participation.** *Are you ready for some football?* Did you know that on the average Sunday NFL games (**picture**), there are less than 30 million Americans watching or attending? Yet, there are 125 million Americans attending, not watching, but attending worship services...and that's just America. Did you know that on just one Sunday in America there are more people sitting in a church service than in all other professional sporting events combined in an entire year?

Isn't it amazing that we have a sports page in every newspaper every day, a sports segment in every news broadcast every day, but not one mention of Christ's Church for weeks or months. Who's really out of touch?

There are 14 million Jews in the world today. 421 million Buddhists. 1.15 billion Hindus. 1.2 billion secularists (atheists or agnostics). 1.8 billion Muslims. But there are 2.4 billion Christians. Yes, I know there are many who claim to be "Christian," who don't truly know Christ, but there are countless others who do.

The bottom line is that there are believers in every nation and culture who believe what we believe – that the Bible is true, that God loves the world so much that He sent His Son to die for our sins and the only way you can go to heaven is to trust Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior. They're not all our brand, but we're on the same team. It's estimated that 1 out of 3 people on this planet is a follower of Christ. So nothing is bigger.

The Church is bigger than the United States and Europe put together. The Church is bigger than China. Nothing on this planet is as big as the Church. The media would have you think that the Church is a kitty, but it's a lion.

Nothing is bigger on planet earth than the Church. It's why Jesus said in Luke 13:19, *"It is like a grain of mustard seed that a man took and sowed in his garden, and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."*

**2. The Church has the widest distribution.** The Church is everywhere. Throw a dart at a world map. You'll have a hard time hitting a spot other than maybe the middle of the ocean where there are not believers. There are villages that have little else, but they have a church. You could visit millions of towns around the world who don't have a school, a clinic, a hospital, a fire department, or a post office. They don't have any businesses, but they have a church. The Church is more widely spread, more widely distributed – than any business franchise in the world. You could take all of the franchises and put them all together; McDonalds, Starbucks, Walmart – they're tiny compared to the Church.

Did you know that 90% of the meals served by the Red Cross to victims of Hurricane Katrina (**pictures**) were actually cooked by Southern Baptist churches? During Katrina the Red Cross had 14,000 volunteers. The Southern Baptist men of Texas alone sent 23,000 men. And that's just one state. Churches are able to jump into action faster than government agencies or the Red Cross. When the director of the Red Cross was asked, "How many of your Red Cross volunteers are church members?" "Oh, 100%." So, why isn't the Church getting the credit? The Church is literally everywhere. Christians who could provide help to the Gulf Coast communicated with Christians in need of help, so relief could be sent immediately.

That happens here at Grace all the time. I'll never forget getting a call in the wee hours of the morning one Super Bowl night. Rich and Jayne Benson's home had caught on fire and burned down. It was a bitter cold night. The Deephouses, one of our church families, opened their home to them. That very night we had them in a hotel. They had difficulty finding housing that worked, so they moved into the church's house.

When Burlington flooded, Phyllis Hancock had an employee who was displaced. We moved her into the church's house. This woman had lost nearly everything. We asked you to bring in supplies and you did. It was overwhelming. That wasn't the government. It was the Church, our church. Over the years we've housed 5 different families who were displaced, plus put countless others in motels...and that's just our church.

The Church was global in its compassion from the beginning. Government and other compassion organizations are only a couple of hundred of years old. They have a long ways to catch up with the Church.

Paul and Barnabus in that 1<sup>st</sup> century were collecting funds to help famine victims in Jerusalem. For 2,000 years we've been ministering to the poor, sick and needy around the globe.

We speak far more languages in the Church than the United Nations. The Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book, nearly 3000 languages. The next book that's even close has only been translated into 583 languages.

**The Church has the widest distribution.**

**3. The Church provides the longest continuation.** The Church has been around for two millennia. We're not some fly-by-night operation. Think about it – America has only been around 250 years.

The Church has a track record that spans centuries. Think of what the Church has endured? Nero (**picture**) lit his gardens with our brothers and sisters, turning them into human torches. Malicious leaders have tried to destroy it, hostile groups have persecuted it, and skeptics have scoffed at it. Nevertheless, God's Church is bigger now than ever before in history.

*Why?* Because Jesus established the Church and it's indestructible. The Bible calls the Church an unshakable kingdom. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says, *"I will build my Church and all the powers of hell will not conquer it"* (NLT). All the powers of hell – in other words, no hurricane, earthquake, tsunami, famine, pandemic, army or evil government will ever conquer the Church.

I believe and hope that Jesus will return soon. But what if He doesn't? What if it's another 1,000 years? Do you think that United States will still be around? What about Starbucks or McDonalds? No, they'll be gone. But I can tell you what will still be here – the Church of Jesus Christ.

**4. The Church provides the fastest expansion.** It's estimated that every day 60,000 people come to faith in Jesus Christ. By the end of today, thousands of new churches will be started throughout the world. And that will happen tomorrow and the next day and the next.

In one country that's closed to traditional Christian missions, more than 60,000 house churches have been started in one province by the work of lay people, no different from the people who fill our church every Sunday.

Why is rapid expansion important? If you've got a problem that's growing quickly, you need a solution growing even more rapidly. For example, HIV/AIDS is growing at an incredibly fast rate. Yet thank God the Church is outgrowing the disease, so more and more believers can help minister to those with HIV/AIDS and other terrible diseases.

Secularists are quick to point out the problems that religion causes within society. Yet, it was the Church that created universities and hospitals. Setting aside the negatives about religion, imagine our world without these institutions. Consider the pro-social motivations within Christianity versus those within the secular community.

British author Malcolm Muggeridge (**picture**) said, *"I've spent a number of years in India and Africa where I found much righteous endeavour undertaken by Christians of all denominations; but I never, as it happens, came across a hospital or orphanage run by [non-believers]."*

Ancient societies and religions weren't known for their care of the sick or dying. But Christians risked their lives to care even for non-Christians. They lived out the radical difference of values taught by the Bible, more than anything else known at that time. It was common in ancient cultures, including Rome, which saw the inception and rise of Christianity, to abandon the sick and dying. Roman religion didn't teach followers to care for the helpless. But against this backdrop, Christianity was a distinct contrast, a Christian Counter-culture. Scripture teaches the intrinsic value of every human being. This is what motivated early Christians to care for their sick. Church leaders followed the biblical admonition to visit the sick. Congregations and communities set up formal practices for care. It became common among Christians and they were challenged to care for non-Christians, too.

Christians introduced a new compassion and standard of care for sick people. When the Black Plague (**picture**) devastated Europe, it was Christians who put their lives in jeopardy to care for the diseased and dying. And now the government has the audacity to tell the Church how to do healthcare?

Jesus went out preaching, teaching and healing. The early church went out preaching, teaching and healing. And everywhere the gospel has gone, you'll find that same pattern.

Please understand this – we Christians aren't just pro-life, we're pro-whole life. Not only do we want that child to be born, we want that child to be safe, healthy, protected and educated. Wherever Christianity has gone, crime has decreased and literacy has increased. We're whole life. We want it all taken care of, plus eternal life.

We've always been pro-education. Every Ivy League college (**picture**), except Cornell, was started by pastors. You'd be hard pressed to name a mission to the poor that wasn't started by Christians and the Church.

If we're going to tackle global giants like poverty, disease, or illiteracy, the government doesn't have the solution. We must be part of something that's growing faster than the problem. The Church is doing just that! **The Church provides the fastest expansion.**

**5. The Church provides the highest motivation.** Why do any of us do what we do to serve the Lord? It's not to make money, or to make a name for ourselves or out of duty to our nation. We do it out of love.

Our Lord stated it as the Great Commandment: *Love God with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself.* We wouldn't do the hard work required to tackle these global giants for money, fame, or for anything else. It just wouldn't be worth it; we'd quit before the end. We're motivated to persevere at the hard work of ministry because we love Jesus Christ...and we love Him because He first loved us!

Our love for God compels us to love other people, even our enemies, even those who hate us. It's love that never gives up. It's love that keeps moving forward despite the appearance of impossible odds, and it is love that outlasts any problem.

**6. The Church provides the strongest authorization.** God authorized the Church to take on global giants, like spiritual lostness, debauchery, idolatry, abuse of women and children, poverty, disease and ignorance. With God's authorization, the outcome is guaranteed to be successful. When you know that God has authorized you to do something, you don't worry about failure...because God doesn't sponsor flops.

If God says we're going to do it, it's going to happen. It is inevitable. In fact, the Bible promises that God will give us His power to complete the task. This is God's way – ordinary people empowered by His Spirit.

**7. The Church provides the simplest administration.** The Church is organized in such a way that we can network faster and with less bureaucracy than most governmental agencies or well-meaning charities.

Read your Bible. Every Christian is a minister because God gifts every believer. Each Christian is commanded by God to use his/her own spiritual gifts, abilities, personality and experiences to do what God has called him or her to do. There's no bureaucracy or hierarchy. There isn't a single committee and the process doesn't require a long list of approvals.

The old wineskin of command and control won't work well in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The organization of the future is the "network." And there's no better worldwide network than the Church, where every member is a minister and empowered to do what God wants done.

Consider it this way – tens of millions of Christians in millions of small groups that are part of churches around the world can take on the global giants with no other authority than that given from Jesus Christ. In other words, we have God's permission and we have His command, and best of all, we have His empowerment to do it.

It's said that Napoleon (**picture**) once pointed to China on a world map and said, "*There lies a sleeping giant and if she ever awakes, she will shake the world.*" That's the Church and if she ever awakes, look out world! **The Church provides the simplest administration.**

**8. The Church provides for God's conclusion.** Since we believe the Bible is God's Word, we already know the end of history. Jesus said in Matthew 24:14, "*And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.*" It is inevitable and unavoidable.

You and I have the privilege of being part of God's plan. It's a great privilege, yet an awesome responsibility. God wouldn't have placed us here if He didn't believe we could handle the task before us. He empowers us and give us all the power and grace we need because it's His work.

In a hundred years what's going to happen to our houses, cars, toys, 401Ks? How about in just 25 or 50 years? Yet, what we do as part of His mission, as part of Jesus Christ's Church, will last for all eternity!

As believers, we know how this all ends and we're all going to get Home before dark. **The Church provides for God's conclusion.**

**Conclusion:** Let me end with this. I think it brings it all home.

There was this man who waited patiently in line to greet his pastor one Sunday after the sermon. "Pastor," this eager, sincere Christ-follower said, "I have only one thing to tell you. My answer is yes. Now, what's the question."

The pastor looked at him, confused, and smiling awkwardly, fell back upon the pastor's safety net: "God bless you." The pastor politely brushed the man off and turned to greet the next parishioner.

But the next week, the same guy waited in line and repeated these words. "My answer is yes. Now, what's the question."

The pastor pondered this enigma. Wanting to get to the bottom of it, he invited the young man to lunch. Over a midweek meal, the young man once again blurted out the intriguing mantra: "Pastor, my answer is yes. Now, what's the question." Finally, overcome with curiosity, the pastor asked, "Can you please tell me what you mean by that?"

The young man smiled and said, "Pastor, I was hooked on everything bad, about to lose my family, sliding down a slippery slope toward certain destruction. Then, Jesus intervened."

Tears welled up in his eyes, "Because of what Jesus did for me, my answer to you is yes. You are my pastor and I'll do whatever you need. You want me to rock babies, I'll rock babies. If you want me to usher, I'll usher. If you want me to mow the church lawn, I'll be here at 6 a.m. every Saturday. My answer to you will be YES!"

Nearly fifty years ago as a teenager, I knelt down by my bed and said, "Yes" to Jesus. My Mom had been killed in a car wreck. My Dad was a prescription drug addict who constantly told me that I was a piece of trash. And as far as I knew, no one loved me BUT I knew that Jesus loved me – and I've been saying "Yes" ever since...and I've never regretted it.

For fifty years my answer to Jesus is yes. Now, what's the question."

It doesn't matter what the Lord wants me to do or where He wants to send me. Isaiah's experience that he describes in Isaiah 6:8 is my prayer too. "*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me.'*"

Many of you sitting here today have also been saying "yes" ever since you came to Christ. You too have said to the Lord, "My answer is yes. Now, what's the question." Because when you know who you were, what a wretch you were and that Jesus loved you and died for you – what other answer is there?

The Apostle John wrote in 1 John 4:19, "*We love Him, because He first loved us.*" When you really get it, when you really get it that Jesus loves you in spite of all of your mess and died for you – you love Him and you love His Church. "*My answer is yes. Now, what's the question.*" Because for the One who gave all for us, there is no holding back.

I love Jesus and I love His Church. I hope that you do too!