

“Church As Performance”  
 Pastor Sam Richards  
 Sermon for 16 February 2025  
 Texts: Gal. 5:16-26

The *performance* of “The Merry Wives of Windsor” has been very much on my mind. The performance and not the play itself. I consider all of the coordination, cooperation and community-building that goes into a performance! I ponder all the streams converging: stagecraft, lighting and sound, costuming, make-up, the promotional efforts, the auditioning, travel, scheduling, rehearsing, training and discipline. I have been reflecting on all that it takes to pull such a thing off. The administrative piece, the organizing piece, the acting piece, and the directing piece! And the whole, entire maintenance of facility at Cumston Hall, Monmouth! All towards the end of learning Shakespeare through a Shakespearian play production. And to build a safe, respectful and appropriate environment for youngsters ages eight to eighteen to both excel and entertain in is all quite impressive, breathtaking.

However, only, if all of these pieces are in place, and everyone takes up his part, his role and diligently executes it does *the performance occur*. And what emerges from this picture is the church as an enactment—itself a performance.

Truly a play is *a thing performed* and it has occurred to me to ask: What if the church! Church is also something we enact.

Church isn’t merely a place, a building we go to, and while there, we attend a service—some readings, some prayers, some singing and some preaching, hopefully based on the Scriptures with a gospel exposition. It is educational. It is provision spiritual sustenance—like a hot meal program where we get something good to eat.

Church like a play production is transformative, a living thing. It has to be. Why, how so? It is life altering. (It is accurate to describe the whole process as a ministry.)

Because the change demanded of us, as followers of Jesus Christ and as heirs to His kingdom, are far beyond our comprehension. They “exceed,” as we might say. And what they exceed is the psychological/individual level we ordinarily operate in.

Furthermore, church is corporate (it takes a cast, a team of players), transpersonal (it unfolds in plot, theme and action) and it is supra-temporal—by which I mean to suggest it is, yes, historical (occurring in time) and yet it bridges past, present and future tenses. If we could freeze-frame the matter, we would have pictures of the church as past, as present and as future and they would coexist in the same photo album.

Of course, the future frame of the church would be visionary, revelatory; it would consist of visions given of the future (church, eternally) prophetically generated such as in the visions of Paul, St. John, Ezekiel and Isaiah which are gifted and preserved for us in Scripture.. And, all of this is quite inspirational, stirring thought, provoking the imagination! To demonstrate that I offer a recent poem of my own.

“From Yon Eastern Hill”

Lord, use the love your Spirit kindles  
To still, to save, to make us whole  
And as we worship give us vision  
In that love’s revealing light.

May we with dawn’s kiss be enlivened  
Quick to serve the day, not the night,  
With enlarging love and mercy’s might  
Disclose to us the chains, needs and longings

Of those yet earthbound and unholy  
That they might flex new wings in flight.  
Make of us worms, beings that soar

Above the disappointed roaring  
Of all that which slays and bears us down.  
Counsel us to counsel others, teach us to teach.  
But speak the word, and it shall be so. . .  
Even as the Son has risen, shed grave clothes  
And he, newborn from the dead,  
Shall return and commune with us  
In magnificent peace and splendid joy

We have been forever saved, eternally  
Sanctified, purified and rendered holy  
Through your flaming words to us  
And through us, cause us to adore you

Hear us as we pray.  
Vouchsafe to us this day.

In this poem the “hill” alluded to is the Mount of Olives from which Christ departed to resume his place beside Father God, from which throne he operates, making intercession for us, his saints, God’s children. A major premise of the first stanza is that the Spirit of our risen Savior ignites something in those whom Christ indwells—a love that stills, saves and heals us. As our day begins, with dawn’s kiss, our desire to serve him takes hold of us and the fire of love kindled by Christ’s Spirit grows in intensity, heat and power. Our field of vision improves as we now see, notice and attend to the spiritual oppression of others (their chains, needs and desires). Your pity for us as earthbound creatures is extended through us, your redeemed ones, no longer hostage to Satan, the dominion of darkness, sin, evil and death. The emaciated condition of sin-bound souls moves us to action; we throw to them the life-preserving gospel and pray for them to seize upon it. We pray for their spiritual life symbolized by flight! Flight in the light! From the perspective of this transcendence, salvation, what lies behind us is reduced to “disappointed

roaring.” If you have ever heard zebras roar like lions, you would easily identify this tumult of terrifying deprivation. We hardly know what indwells a man; let alone what dwells within wildlife—even wildlife captured in a metropolitan zoo. The death spiral of satanic rebellion is terrible to observe if we are unfamiliar with victory, our triumph in Christ over all of it. The cancelation of injustice and evil is awesome. We are given coupled and the capacity to teach so that others may enlist, join in the Kingdom work that covers what is being celebrated. With Christ ensconced in our center, in our hearts, Lord over our essential being—as well as our hope, love and confidence, we are made more than conquerors. “Forever saved eternally” is where all the witnesses bring us, all the recorded speech of our blessed Savior. Yes, those are flaming words, purifying, refining, redemption itself! From the hill of his departure, to the hill of his return, we expectantly cry, “Lord, come quickly. Amen”

The whole poem celebrates the life of Christ in us: Colossians 1:27. Christ in us is our hope of glory. He is the solar furnace in our solar system of being, our church life, our production, our performance. All the glorious promises of God *in all the testament of God, Old and New*, are **yes and amen**; all are sourced, accomplished and fulfilled in Him. We shall be, and are restored along with all creation which is what all the fuss is about.

Let’s return to the idea of **performance**, *of all the streams converging* which we introduced at the start. And let’s substitute the word “ministries” for “streams.” There are ministries of caring (for the young, the elderly, the housebound, the handicapped or the chronically ill)—which sometimes appear as package deals. Basic human needs can be broken down; clothing, food, water, shelter and safety can form the foundation for a ministry (a food pantry, hot meals, second-hand clothing storefronts, yard sales, fund raisers etc). Task forces, sub-committees, volunteer teams can rally around the needs (build houses, remodel homes, repair fire and flood-damaged housing). And the whole matrix, the surrounding medium, or structure of these ministries defines the church in action, or church as enacted. Association, friendship and community coalesce around these ministries. SMASH is a youth ministry to the arts—chiefly theater and drama—which demonstrates the sovereignty of Christ in its cultural expressions.

I have been intrigued by the experimental use of theater/drama in prison populations. Some exciting therapeutic outcomes have been registered, documented and note. Some inmates have had personal breakthroughs in, or through play acting and drama. Playing a dramatic villain has turned some real life villains away from villainy—the beneficiaries mastering some positive social role models, an element lacking in their impoverished development.

Not only role playing, but the voluntary submission to direction, to the guidance of a director(!) can build a healthier response to authority (and can transfer from the stage to real life interactions with police and to others in authority. That benefits everyone as if it reverses the adverse effects of what is called social pathology. In brief, bad actors can become good actors; one’s character can be positively altered. But I digress.

Bringing Christian values to bear on *decision-making* in all walks of life—that is, living out one’s faith in the work place, in the real world—is the challenge of every believer. We have to apply what we believe in what we do. That is the essence of being a kingdom worker. If we do all to the glory of God, there will be amazing, positive outcomes. And I say positive outcomes

pointedly because sometimes being a Christian brings us into conflict with corruption, with sinful oppression. We asserted this week under the heading of cozenage—the widespread use of trickery and deceit to advantage ourselves in the cost of robbing others. If we do not covet, and do not steal the world becomes a more stable and healthy place. Those who live out their values tend to be virtuous! And that is a very good thing.

On top of ministries of caring, we also have ministries of justice which include workplace conduct, being honest and productive workers, promptness, efficiency, neatness and respect. Living lawfully is what we encourage for all believers. When we pray for God's guidance in the ministries we are engaging congregationally—we are honoring our covenant before God and one another. We enact our community of service, outreach and mission. And these things require training, education and support. We are God's instrument for confronting a distempered and disordered world. There seems to be broad agreement on the diagnosis, however, and some confusion about our active role in bringing about that better world through obedience, discipleship and evangelistic worship. Evangelistic worship is what's behind our local church mission: that all should know, love and worship God.

And what is the confusion actually about? I suggest it is common to assume that we are consumers of our faith and not workers in God's kingdom outreach. We are all ministers and missionaries and workers. What we contribute is very important and it actually fills the whole week not just our hours in the pew! We are dealing with things imparted and imputed for the sake of bringing forth, raising up and pushing forward. We are assertive, proactive and the world misjudges us as passive and reactive. Let their mistake be to our advantage! We will persist at overcoming evil with good, and hate with love because of who we are becoming in Christ Jesus. Do pardon the expression, but we are actors in his show and what we are performing is to the glory of the one who created, called, redeemed and saved us for His very one purpose—His own glory'

**Amen.**