

KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2024
“WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?”
SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 22:36-40; 28:16-20
REV. IRENE WILLIS HASSAN

Matthew 22:36-40

36 “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

37 Jesus replied: ““Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’[a] 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[b] 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 28:16-20

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. **17** When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. **18** Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. **19** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Sermon: What Are We Doing Here?

Our annual budget and mission meeting is upon us, and I anticipate it will be a challenging one. The proposals on the table call for us to make decisions that might feel starkly different from "how we've done things" in the past. And I feel it's important to ground this meeting in a larger question: What are we doing here? Why do we come together? What is the purpose of our tithing, our efforts, our shared time in this place?

You've heard me say repeatedly that we're never going back to the church of the 1980's. Honestly, A huge part of me wishes we could. I often mourn that I wasn't old enough to be a pastor in 1987 (the year I was born!), because my job would've been a lot easier back then. I would've had a huge community of diverse believers that are invested in a number of passionate projects. I would've probably had an associate pastor who took on a huge amount of my current responsibilities. I wouldn't be writing a sermon in anticipation of difficult losses over a budget that doesn't add up to what we wish it was.

I don't mean to complain – I mean to say that I mourn with you. I've asked God many times why He called me to ministry in this time when the Western Church is essentially collapsing and the struggles of believers and pastors across the board are so heavy.

When I ask God this question – why was I born to be a Pastor in this time – I'm often met with a quote from J.R.R. Tolkien's famous “Lord of the Rings” series. In the book, the protagonist Frodo says to the Wizard Leader, Gandalf: “I wish it need not have happened in my time.” Gandalf responds to Frodo, "So do I, and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us, and the current time is not the 1980s. Some may wonder exactly what I mean by that. Why not go back to the church of the 1980s? Isn't that a time many remember fondly as the "glory days" of church? Well, it's not that simple.

I was born in 1987, so like many of us who grew up in church in the 1980s and 1990s, I remember what those churches felt like as a young person. I remember the social scene, the programs, the activities that seemed to fill every Sunday, every Wednesday, and many Saturdays too. And yet, despite all that, there was something deeply lacking—a true sense of spiritual purpose, deep discipleship, and real, lasting connection with Jesus. Many of us growing up in that era didn't experience the church as a place where we developed a meaningful, transformative relationship with God.

In conversations I've had over the years with friends who left the church, they have all echoed the same feedback: the church in the 1980s and 1990s often felt more like a social club than a place of spiritual growth. People would gather, socialize, talk, and have a good time, but they wouldn't dive deeply into the teachings of Christ or apply them to real, messy, everyday life. They rarely engaged with the Bible in a way that acknowledged its complexity and relevance. The result? For many, the church became a place without substance—a club that read from a book but didn't seem to live by it.

Some friends have shared painful stories about their experiences in church during that time. One friend's story stands out vividly: she grew up in a church like ours, and her father served on the church council. When he cheated on her mother, divorced her, and remarried to the person he cheated with, she was told by church leaders that her father was a "faithful man" and knew what was best for the family. This was the church's response to her in a time of confusion and hurt. For her, that was the nail in the coffin—the church had shown her it cared more about its reputation than about honest, compassionate care.

I know another person my age had a defining moment in childhood here, at this very church (sorry, folks). Around age ten, he asked the King's Company leader if his dear Jewish friend was going to hell. When the leader answered yes, that young boy made a purposeful decision to stand by his friend, who had shown him more kindness, compassion, and honesty than he'd felt from the church. And just like that, he turned away from the church entirely and never came back.

And as I've shared with you before, my own story includes a time when the church of the 1990s let me down. When I was 15 and found myself pregnant, I didn't receive compassion or guidance. Instead, I was told to go find a doctor or social worker—that my problems were no business of the church. The people I trusted to embody Christ's love told me I didn't belong. I too, left the church, and by the grace of God was called back.

These stories are part of a larger pattern. The church of the 1980s and 1990s often acted as if its main purpose was to keep the machinery running, to keep up appearances, to "manage" the church and fill seats on councils rather than tend to the spiritual lives of its members. It became a functional, well-oiled machine rather than a community of believers seeking truth, transformation, and connection with God. When life got hard for children and young people, the church seemed more concerned with its structure than with offering real support.

And I believe that's why God did away with it.

I say this not out of bitterness or judgment but because I believe God’s vision for the church is so much greater than a club or a bureaucracy. The church isn’t meant to be a machine that simply preserves the status quo. I became a pastor because I believe wholeheartedly that the church’s future holds incredible potential to bring real good into the world, if we refocus on what Jesus taught us truly matters. I’m the pastor of *this* specific church because, in your soul-searching over the past several years, and in the stories many of you share from the “glory days,” I see that focus on Jesus and His commandments as the true heart of who we are. Though mistakes have been made over the years, and God’s grace has covered us because we are all human, the heart of the gospel remains alive here—alive despite times when the “old ways” and the weight of bureaucracy and status quo maintenance tried to overshadow it. The church is meant to be a living, breathing community, grounded in the two simple yet profoundly challenging commands Jesus gave us: the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.

In Matthew 22, Jesus was asked which commandment is the greatest. His reply was clear: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40, NIV).

This is the heart of what we’re called to do. Not run a perfectly organized institution, but love God and love people—completely, sacrificially, and without hesitation. We’re meant to meet with integrity the scared teenager whose renowned father has betrayed her. We’re meant to be loving her and listening to her despite what this might imply for our church council. We’re meant to love the preteen boy and mirror the places where he sees love, including in his valued friendships. We’re meant to love the teenage girl frightened and pregnant, not cast her aside for someone else to take care of. This love is not just an abstract feeling but something that should permeate every action, every relationship, every decision we make.

The second pillar is the Great Commission. In Matthew 28, after His resurrection, Jesus told His disciples, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20, NIV). This is our mission: to make disciples. Not members of a club, not attendees of an event, but people who know Jesus deeply, follow Him closely, and live out His teachings in the world.

Our focus on the superficial—on council seats, programming for programming’s sake, on the “appearance” of church rather than the life-giving essence of church—is what killed the church. When people needed help, support, love, and guidance, they often found an institution more concerned with its image than with the love of Christ. None of the three young people referenced were discipled by the church of the 1980s: we were simply told to conform, to “get with the program or get out,” and get out is indeed what the three of us did.

The church we’re called to be is not a machine. We’re called to be a place where people encounter the love of God and are transformed by it, where they learn to follow Jesus and are supported by a community that truly cares. Every breath we take in this place, every decision we make, should be about loving God and loving our neighbors with everything we have and making disciples along the way. That’s the whole point.

We don't need a council with every seat filled by people who look good on paper. We need leaders who genuinely care about serving God and others. We don't need King's Company led by someone who's just doing their duty. We need leaders with a heart for discipling children. It's not about how we look; it's about who we are in Christ.

Today, we have an opportunity to choose the path forward. Do we try to bring back the church of the 1980s, with its structures, forms, and social focus? Or do we step into the calling God has given us, to be a place where people are loved deeply and genuinely and where discipleship is the heart of all we do? I believe God is calling us into this new way because He's done away with the old way. He's stripped back what was superficial to reveal what's essential.

It's no accident that the Great Commandment and Great Commission are both in the Book of Matthew, which had the same focus then as we do now. Matthew's primary purpose was to highlight the laws and social functions of religion at that time that were no longer serving the community or God, and instead refocus on the laws that Jesus taught to summarize the Old Ways more efficiently: love God, love people, make disciples. The church we are becoming is built on the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Everything else—our traditions, our committees, our routines—should support these purposes or be left behind. We don't need anything that isn't about loving God, loving people, or making disciples.

As we enter this new chapter, let's bring our attention back to that central question we started with: *What are we doing here?* Why do we gather, pour out our tithes, and offer our time and talents to this church community? It's not because we're preserving a system or recreating the church of the 1980s. In fact, God called us here, in this time, precisely because there's a different, deeper work to be done.

We are here to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are here to make disciples, to be a place where people can find a true, transformative relationship with Jesus. And though we may feel a sense of loss for what once was, we can trust that God is guiding us toward something even more profound—a church that is truly alive, rooted in purpose and compassion.

Although in weakness I sometimes mourn not having the resources of a 1980s pastor, I often spend more time praising God for the opportunity to work with Kailua Christian Church to serve out His purpose with the integrity that He designed. We have a real unique opportunity here, my friends, to live out Jesus' commandments without the baggage of social function and expectation that God has cleared away. Like Matthew, we're embarking on an exciting adventure in God's plan, rather than a sour downturn of change. With this in mind, let's meet His will for us with enthusiasm rather than regret.

So, as we prepare to meet today and make decisions about our path forward, let's keep our focus on the calling before us. Let's decide, together, to embrace the time given to us. Let's build a church grounded in love and discipleship, fully alive and faithful to God's calling. May we be a community that's not just surviving but thriving in the love and truth of Christ.

This is our purpose. This is what we're doing here.

Amen.