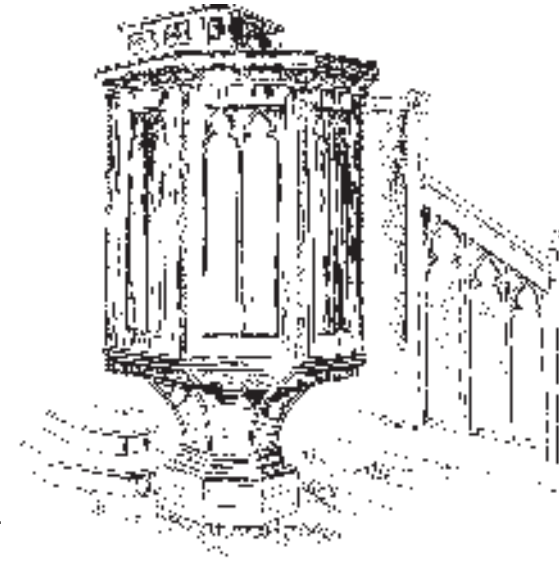


September 13, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

We Miss You at the Kirk

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Psalm 117
John 15:1-11

Are you a faithful member of the church? How do you define faithful? A while back, a periodical for Presbyterian ministers called *Monday Morning* asked that question in the form of a little quiz concerning church attendance. The purpose of the quiz was to see if you apply the same standards of "faithfulness" to your church activities that you do in other areas of life. I found the quiz provocative. Here it is:

"If your car starts one out of three times, do you consider it 'faithful'?"

"If you fail to come to work two or three days a month, would you be missed?"

"If your refrigerator quits for a day now and then, do you excuse it and say, 'Oh, well, it works most of the time'?"

"If your water heater greets you with cold water one or two mornings a week, would it be called, 'faithful'?"

"If you miss a couple of mortgage payments in a year's time, would the bank say, 'Hey, 10 out of 12 isn't too bad'?"

“If you miss worship once or twice a month, are you ‘faithful’?”

George Gallup did a major poll a few years ago which illuminates American attitudes regarding church activity. Here are some of the statements where the Gallup organization asked people for positive and negative responses:

“There is a God...**yes** or no?” 94% of Americans believe there is a God.

“God is concerned about mankind...
Yes or no?”

“God is creator, judge, redeemer...
Yes or no?”

“God is revealed in Jesus Christ...
Yes or no? 80% of Americans say Jesus is the Son of God.

“God demands obedience...**Yes** or no?”

“One who believes these things must be active in the church...yes or **No.**”

When they asked about churchgoing, the refrain again and again was, “You don’t have to go to church to be religious.” That is the opinion of 88% of those who don’t go to church and 70% of those who do.

Why are so many people indifferent or hostile to the Church? We’ve all heard the reasons... “I don’t attend church because: the people in it are so hypocritical; it doesn’t **DO** anything; it’s not relevant to my life; I don’t believe God has ‘office hours’ only on Sunday mornings; the people in churches are always fighting among themselves; the organ is played too loudly and I prefer guitars anyway; I’m more interested in this world than in heaven; the church is always 50 years behind the times; with all that’s going on in my life, Sunday morning is the only quiet time we have as a family. Besides, in the fall the kids play soccer Sunday mornings; I just don’t have time for church; religion is an individual matter; ministers don’t practice what they preach.” Some of these objections are valid and some are foolish. But every one of them is commonly heard.

I remember some years ago a couple, members of the First Presbyterian Church in Jamestown, NY, related to me a disturbing conversation they experienced at a dinner party. It seems another couple at the party, who were members of their church—who pledged, but who did not attend except on rare occasions—this other couple began to ask about the church. They wondered what the scoop was—were there any controversies or conflicts?—who was angry with whom?—you know—the dirt. If you dig deep enough, you’re sure to find some.

When that line of questioning didn’t lead anywhere, the couple began a different tact. “You know we don’t go to church much anymore, haven’t for years; but, you don’t have to go to church to be religious. I can worship God on the golf course; and in the winter there’s this in-door tennis league on Sunday mornings—we have great fellowship.”

The couple who was listening to this was put in an awkward spot. What do you say at a time like that? How do you respond without sounding defensive or condemning? They weren’t sure and so they came to me.

I told them that there isn't any magical response to the, 'You don't have to go to church to be religious' complaint. I still don't know a cure-all phrase. If I knew one, this Westminster sanctuary would be as full this morning as it is on Christmas Eve at 10:00. It is true: religion is a personal thing. In a sense, I can't tell you why you should go to church, only why I go and what believers throughout the centuries have found meaningful and true about attending church every Sunday.

Perhaps we should begin by defining the "Church." The "Church" is not this Gothic sanctuary, with the Gothic stained glass windows by Tiffany and the Gothic choir and even some say—the Gothic minister. The "Church" with a capital C, is rather that great fellowship of men and women down through the ages, in heaven and on earth, the saints, the martyrs, the ordinary stumbling folks like us, who have committed themselves to God as God is made known in Jesus Christ, and who try to live their lives in terms of that faith.

The average person who makes the remark, "I don't need the Church, I've got my own religion," seems cheerfully unaware that probably every item in his or her private creed has come to him from the community in which he was raised. And the religious expression of that community is the Church. If we inquire into the concept of God, Christian ethics, or of prayer that she holds in her "own religion," we often will find that in one way or another she got them from the Church. With all their faults, religious institutions have, in fact, been the carriers of the dynamic ideas and practices which men and women live.

In this sense the Church is our mother—just as at one time our mother was for us the Church. A person may see his mother's faults, may criticize her, may even, in extreme cases, cut himself off from her. But she remains his mother, the one from whom he received the gift of life. So, no matter what our view of the Church may **now** be, she remains for most of us the mother from whom what spiritual life we have, inevitably derives.

Although many of the unchurched express gratitude for what they received from Sunday school, their personal faiths, like cut flowers, have stopped growing. Their religion is like a dried flower pressed in a Bible, and often seems to consist of nothing more than a desire for peaceful feelings, a vague longing to be connected with something that transcends the self and a sense of obligation to be decent to others—all positive stirrings, but hardly the vigorous plant that could flourish in a nurturing religious community. The memories of childlike religious sentiments are not strong enough stuff to equip adult saints for their work of ministry in the 21st century.

The bottom line is that Christianity is *always communal* as well as *personal*. Christianity from the very beginning was a community. Jesus called his disciples one by one, but immediately welded them into a group. Why, then, should I reject or ignore the Christian group today, however much I may feel it to have departed from the ideals and methods of the first community? By what logic can I detach myself from it while holding on to what seems more valuable, saying: "I've got my own religion. Who needs a church?" Surely, if I believe in the gospel that the Church has preserved and proclaimed, my duty is to stay within and make my dissatisfactions felt in the reforming movement that all the great churches are experiencing today.

And besides, Christians find that their ethical concerns are strengthened by their corporate life together. As Christians do things together, they not only strengthen and undergird one another, but they also find that God's spirit strengthens and undergirds what they do.

But more than comfort and support, the Church places demands upon the individual. I hope I am not too harsh when I say that some, at least, are using this phrase: "I don't need to go to church to be religious" to express their desire not to be bothered with a religion that is going to make some demands on their time, their talents, their energies, and their purse. They want a religion that provides them, when necessary, with some guidance and comfort, but **not** one that makes demands.

Now it may well be that our churches often make the wrong kind of demands in the name of Christ, but at their best, they remind us that Christianity is a matter of giving, as well as getting. And when we seriously reflect upon what we have been given through the church, surely we owe it a faithful measure of support. When in the Gospels I read the demands Christ makes upon his followers, I can't help feeling that for me to slip away from the obligations of the Christian community in the name of my private religion is too easy a way out.

I, for one, need the discipline of the Church both to remind me of my duties and to provide an outlet for what I may have to give. The religious free-lancer may have the benefit of all that the churches, past and present, have to offer through their thinkers, saints, artists, and charitable works—but what is she giving in return?

And so, if I were bold enough, if I had the courage, what I would really like to say when I overhear the remark: "I've got my own religion. Who needs a church?" is, "You borrowed your religion, and you're paying nothing back. You **do** need a church because none of us can ultimately go it alone; because the Church is the carrier of the faith from one generation to another; because we all need the strength and discipline the Church offers in order to grow; because the Church needs *you*, and because God desires your worship." I've never put it just like that to anyone. I suppose I have too much sympathy when people point out some of the Church's shortcomings. But I am saying it now.

There was an old Scot, a Presbyterian, in a Kirk outside Edinburgh, who had been baptized and confirmed in the tradition of his forebearers. In his mid-fifties, he was ordained an elder, and served the Church faithfully. But one night, in a Session meeting, another elder said something that was unkind—criticized the man in front of the others. And of course, he was offended. He rose from his seat around the table, walked out the door, and refused to return. A month passed, and then a year, and then another year, and still he would not come back. Letters were sent, phone calls were made, but to no avail. The old Scot was bitter and hurt and believed that he had been forsaken.

Then a new pastor came to the Kirk and was told about the old man, who was now in his 80s. The pastor said a prayer, and then walked up the pathway to where the former churchman lived. He knocked on the door, and when it was opened he saw the man standing there with anger in his eyes and bitterness on his face. As they went into the living room, neither of them spoke. They sat down by the fire, looked into the burning coals, and said nothing for nearly an hour. That's a long silence. Then, the young pastor stood up, took a pair of tongs and removed a burning white coal out from the fire and set it down on the hearth. They both watched the coal flicker and grow dim and then finally go out. Then, the pastor picked it up again with the tongs, placed it back in the fire, and they both watched it begin to turn, bright and strong once more. The pastor looked at the old man and said, "We miss you at the Kirk."

This sermon has drawn heavily from the book *The Bible Speaks to You* by Robert McAfee Brown.