

## WHY ORGANIZED RELIGION? Acts 1:12-17, 21-26

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on October 13, 2019, the Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia, as part of a fall sermon series entitled “Why...?”*

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*Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.*

*In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said,*

*‘Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.’*

...

*So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.’*

*So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said,*

*‘Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.’*

*And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.*

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Let us pray: *O God of earth and altar, Winston Churchill once said: “Words spoken two or three thousand years ago remain with us now, not as mere relics of the past, but with all their pristine vital force.” May the words of this sermon – drawing on words from the past – provide such force today. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.*

### I.

In this series of “Why” questions I am preaching this Fall, I want to move today from high-minded questions such as “Why Worship?” “Why Learn?” and “Why Community?” to something a bit closer to the ground: “Why Organized Religion?” The question could be re-phrased: “Why does the church have to be a business – an institution – like nearly every other entity with which we deal in society?” Why Organized Religion?

When I am asked that question from time to time, my normal “smart aleck” retort is to say: “It beats *disorganized* religion.” But I think the answer goes deeper than that.

- In Christianity, as well as in Judaism out of which we have grown, there is an understanding of reality that is at least two-dimensional: heaven and earth, the spiritual and the secular, the ideal and the real.
- Because we are among the “historical religions,” not in the sense that we have a long history but in the sense that we believe God has revealed Who God Is *within* history, there is a certain earthbound-ness to our faith: a certain concern with life *here* and *now*, rather than just life in a heavenly realm in the future.
- Thus, our faith is normally formed and takes shape in a particular religious community – the people of God, the church, the congregation – and then lives itself out in the larger communities in which “we live and move and have their being”<sup>1</sup> – relationships and family, work and leisure, community, nation, and world. Ours is a God whom we come to know and serve as we move *between* church and world.
- In addition, we believe that as Messiah, Jesus Christ was born *in* the world, taught and healed *in* the world, was put to death by the political processes and forces *of* the world, was raised a body *in* the world, and will return at the end of all time to “make all things new”<sup>2</sup> *concerning* the world.

Because our faith exists within the world, we join with others and become a community, an organization, an institution *within* the world. We are more than a collection of individuals who seek interaction with God on a *personal* level; we are a people, a community, *organized* to worship, serve, learn and grow together. We are an organization. We are an institution – what Peter calls “a royal priesthood, a holy nation.”<sup>3</sup>

## II.

The Bible depicts dimensions of this organizational aspect of the people of God at several places along the way.

When the people of Israel are first led from slavery to freedom, their leader Moses turns to Jethro, his Gentile father-in-law, out of an acute need to learn to delegate all the responsibility he has taken upon himself as leader of the Israelites.

Jethro says to him:

What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you....Now listen to me...You should represent the people before God, and you should bring their cases before God... You should *also* look for able...people...who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set...them as officers...let them bring every *important* case to you, but decide every *minor* case themselves....If you do this...you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their home in peace.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 17:28.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21:5.

<sup>3</sup> I Peter 2:9.

Moses listens to his father-in-law and *organizes* the people of God for their maximum effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> *Organized religion.*

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Centuries later, when the prophet Jeremiah is warning the people of Israel that the destruction of their capital Jerusalem is imminent because of their unfaithfulness, Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel pays him a visit and tells them that a mutual relative has died and left them a piece of property – on which Jeremiah has the right of first refusal. The property lies at ground zero in the center of Jerusalem. Jeremiah pauses his prophetic activity, enters into what becomes the lengthiest and most detailed business transaction described in the Bible. He announces that even though he has been prophesying doom, the day will come when, according to the Lord, “Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land...for [the Lord] will restore [our] fortunes.”<sup>5</sup>

Jeremiah thus buys a piece of property, signs the deed, records it at the courthouse, as a sign of the hope to come. Again, *organization.*

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And in the passage we read in the New Testament today, the earliest disciples have just passed through the death of Christ, have heard proclaimed and accepted his resurrection, have seen him appear to them and to others, have received his spirit at Pentecost, are now ready to embark on their tasks of preaching and teaching and healing and spreading the good news of salvation for all. But first they must *re-organize* and select a replacement for Judas, their fallen and now deceased disciple. They gather. They meet. They set the agenda for the meeting. They outline qualifications for nominees to replace Judas. They ask for nominations from the floor. Two are nominated – Matthias and Joseph called Barsabbas. They pray. The choice is not apparent. Finally, they draw straws. Matthias is chosen; and Barsabbas returns to civilian life. Then, as an *organization*, they go about spreading the gospel.

The theological answer to “Why Organized Religion” is this: Because the God we worship has acted *in history*, because the Christ we follow is *incarnate* in history, because our calling as the people of God is to serve God *in history*. Thus, as the church, as the people of God, we organize ourselves in the forms of organization that history bequeaths us. Within our time and place, within the history in which we live, institutions and organizations become the place and focal point from which *most* of the action we do originates and to which *most* of it returns. It does beat *disorganized* religion!

### III.

But notice I said the word “most.” “Most” is not “all.”

Because we are an institution, like all institutions, we face limits. In the case of the church, and especially of a local congregation, we can neither *contain* nor *exhaust* the needs, desires, yearnings, searchings, experiences or even hallmarks of faith of *all* our members, visitors, or friends.

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<sup>4</sup>Exodus 18.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremiah 32:15, 44.

- No program of ministry or collection of ministries
- No liturgy
- No congregation
- No sermon or series of sermons
- No anthem or hymn
- No mission program
- No class or learning experience
- No set of relationships

Can contain *all* our religious aspirations, experiences, expressions. Some in the church – some in our church – rightly have their deepest experiences of God *outside* the church. But the church can still be a center *from which* we move *out* in our faith and *to which* we *return* in our faith.

That is what makes the church as an institution so important. We at Westminster – as an institution – have a reasonable chance of being *in* this location, *on* this corner, week in and week out, decade in and decade out, generation to generation, as a *center* and *focus* for a thoughtful, serving, worshipful, community of Christians or people exploring Christianity in Alexandria and Arlington, Beverly Hills and Del Ray, DC, Fairfax, and even Loudon Counties, for the foreseeable future, as we have for nearly eighty years.

This is one reason I am never personally shy – within the bounds of respecting you – about asking you to consider joining Westminster, asking you to consider deepening your involvement in Westminster, asking you to support our work financially through giving, pledging, tithing, and through tithing your estate or better, so that we can be the *best* and *strongest* institution we can be welcoming and nurturing people in the faith as we know it.

#### IV.

Early in ministry it came my turn to preach at the 8:30 service in a church I was serving in Texas. The early service was held in a chapel much like ours: There were about fifty people gathered, and from the chancel my view was of the two, beautiful, wooden double doors at the center of the center aisle leading into the narthex. After the service had started and the ushers had taken seats, the door opened slightly and I saw a tall woman whom I had never seen before peak in then pull back. I assumed she was embarrassed being late and had returned home.

But when the sermon started, the door creaked opened again, and a hand slide through the slight space and held the door slightly ajar. The hand held the door open through the sermon, and then when the sermon ended, the hand slid back and the door closed tightly. To my knowledge, I never saw the woman who presumably owned the hand in the door again.

But I have often wondered:

- Did the hand belong to someone who had been recently grief-stricken: lost a job, a relationship, a spouse, a parent, a child?
- Did the hand belong to someone who had searched church after church for one which spoke to her mind, her heart, her will?

- Did the hand belong to someone for whom long sought joy had come to fruition, leading her to recognize as source of that joy Someone beyond herself, to whom she was drawn to the church to express her gratitude?
- Had the owner of the hand been hurt by a church years earlier, and now was venturing back?
- Did the hand belong to someone on their way to their first AA meeting?

My friends, the door of the church is always open, even if seems only ever so slightly. It is open, always, for us to come in and go out as need be, for our faith and our life in the world.

But in order to have an open door, we have to have an institution to which it is attached, as a passage way of welcome and entrance.

Amen.

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