

WHY CHURCH?

Genesis 12:1-4

I Corinthians 9:19-22

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 23, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the first of five sermons this Fall focused on “Why” questions related to the church: “Why Church?”; “Why Westminster?”; “Why Join?” “Why Give?” “Why Tithe”?

Genesis 12:1-4

Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

I Corinthians 9:19-22

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.

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So I normally reserve my sermon series for the summer, if for no other reason than I like the alliteration of summer sermon series; but this year I am going to do a Fall Sermon series. The series will ask five “Why” questions – one each sermon:

- Why Church?
- Why Westminster?
- Why Join?
- Why Give?
- Why Tithe?

Larry Johnson, our sexton who manually changes the letters on the marquee on the front lawn each week, will appreciate the brevity and repetition within each title.

The series will lead up to our stewardship campaign, in which we each decide how much of our financial resources we will pledge to the work of Westminster in 2019, but it will not be limited to that focus. In some ways, the series will ask basic questions about why we are here, why we are involved in a church at all, and what role our involvement plays in our lives. In a time in which American religious life is changing,¹ and in a

¹ See Pew Research Center, “The Religious Typology: A New Way to Categorize Americans by Religion,” August 29, 2018. Available at <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/29/the-religious-typology/>.

church in which many of us may only be here for three or four years before being transferred to the next city, we all benefit from paying attention to fundamental questions this series will address.

We begin by asking “Why Church?”

In many ways, I am not the best person to answer this question, because though I do not have clergy in my background, the Presbyterian Church was always – along with sports and study – one of three pillars of my childhood and youth. Because of my early bonding with the church, I have never wandered from it, even during times of crisis or doubt. Therefore I am not much of one to question “Why Church?” But I am going to try to answer the question through two Biblical texts and several stories.

I.

I have an initial, one-word answer to “why church?” That answer is “community.”

When I served as a Pastor in the Midwest, the church I served had founded a liberal arts college down the street in the mid-1800s. While the official ties were loose between the college and church, the symbolic and historic ties remained strong. Many students and faculty were involved in the church. Every President of the college had been a member of the church.

When a new President was promoted following lengthy service as Academic Dean, he and his family visited the church to see if it was a fit. I made an appointment with him and his wife, and at the end of the visit he said: “We have decided to break with tradition and not become members of the church. Though we both grew up in the church [he said], our needs for *community* are met here through the faculty and students and alumni of the college, and we simply don’t think we need the additional community of the church.”

I thanked them for considering membership, and continued to work with him in certain capacities over the next few years. I respected that he and his wife recognized that an important aspect of the church was *community*; they simply had sufficient community in their lives already.

About that same time, a member of the church asked me to visit his brother who in the hospital, in the last few months of life, dying of cancer. The brother was not a member of the church, but I visited anyway; and every time I visited there would be 2-3 different men – in jeans and work-shirts and hunting jackets – sitting by his bedside. The man introduced them to me as fellow members of the local gun club. Every time I went to the hospital one or two gun club members were sitting by his bed, and it was rarely the same people.

When the man died I conducted his funeral in the church. There were over two hundred people. 150 or more were men. I had never conducted a funeral in which such a large percentage of the people in attendance were men. And they were virtually all from the gun club.

Now I have never hunted. I didn’t own a B-B Gun as a child. I have never touched a gone, shot a gun, owned a gun. My only experience with guns is to have been in a couple of pastoral care situations where one has been drawn but then quickly surrendered to skilled police officers. But from what I observed of this man in the last months of his life, the gun club was an enormous community of people who cared for one another, who cared for him. Leaving the funeral his brother said: “I could never get him to come to church, but he had all the community he needed in the gun club.”

I share these two stories from the same city during the same time period because in them two different families articulate the importance of community while finding their community outside the church: in the faculty of a liberal arts college, in a club of hunters and outdoorsmen. Their stories illustrate *that a fundamental aspect of being human means being in community.*

Community is built into our Judeo-Christian faith. In the Biblical witness to Creation, the narrator of Genesis writes:

So God created humankind in *his* image,
in the image of God he created *them*;
male and female created he *them*.²

Part of being created “in the image of God” is being created in community: “*male and female* he created *them*.”

Likewise, a few chapters later, when God forms the people of Israel, God calls Abram, saying: “I will make of you a great *nation*.” A nation. A community. A people. Not “I will make of you a great *individual*,” but “I will make of you a great *nation*.” Community. Community.

In our culture, we have stirring tributes to the glory and power of the *individual*:

“I am the master of my fate//The captain of my soul.”³

“If you can keep your head when all about you//Are losing theirs and blaming it on you...”⁴

The columnist David Brooks recently pointed out that one of the most popular gifts for students graduating from college is the celebration of individualism that was Dr. Seuss’ final book: “Oh, the Places You Will Go!”

Today is your day
You’re off to Great Places!...

You have brains in your head.
You have feet in your shoes
You can steer *yourself*
Any direction *you* choose.

You are on *your* own. And you know what you know
And *YOU* are the [one] who’ll decide where to go.⁵

Each of these pieces from our national literature serves as stirring tribute to individual spirit, individual effort, individual intelligence, individual talent, individual ambition, individual striving, individual accomplishment. They are inspiring and uplifting, but they only get *half* right the nature of human existence. For even individual striving and achieving occur within community: drawing support, nurture, care, wisdom, challenge, critique from those who have gone before us and from those who walk on the same soil on which we walk. “I shall make of you a great *nation*...” God said to Abram. Not a great individual, but a great people, a great nation.

² Genesis 1:27.

³ William Earnest Henley, “Invictus,” *Book of Verses* (1875).

⁴ Rudyard Kipling, “If,” *Reward and Fairies* (1910).

⁵ Dr. Seuss, “Oh, the Places You Will Go!” (New York: Random House, 1992), referred to in David Brooks, “The Strange Failure of the Educated Elite,” in *The New York Times* 5/28/2018.

II.

But the church does not exist simply as *one* among *several* communities by which we mortals fulfill our need for community. In addition to being a *place* of community like many other places, the church exists as *that particular community* in which we grow in our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, as Savior, as Redeemer, as Sustainer, as Author and Pioneer of the very faith which brings us to the community of the church and keeps us in it.

In the earliest days of the spread of Christianity, the apostle Paul, who perhaps more than any other mortal was responsible for that spread, intuitively knew that the community of people he led – known as the church – were united almost solely by the fact that they had been baptized into the name of Jesus Christ, who had lived and died upon the face of the earth, who had been raised from the dead, and whose life, death, and resurrection had redeemed the human race and led to the possibility of salvation for every human being.

Paul himself had been steeped in Judaism, but then through a vision had seen that the risen Christ was indeed the Messiah. In that same vision he had been called to take that Good News beyond its origins in the *people* God had created through the call of Abraham and Sarah and to bring that good news into the quite different Greco-Roman culture, mindset and geography.⁶ Paul knew that for some of the Christian congregations he founded the *only* thing that united them was their belief in Christ, for they had *so little else* in common. Thus in his leadership he opened the doors as widely as possible to reach out to and include within the congregations he founded *everyone he could* so that in their experience of *community* they found or grew in their *faith*.

...I have made myself a *slave* to all [Paul wrote],
so that I might *win* more of them.

To the *Jews* I became as a *Jew*,
in order to *win Jews*.

To those *under the law*
I became as one *under the law*...
so that I might *win* those *under the law*.

To those *outside the law*
I became as one *outside the law*...
so that I might *win* those *outside the law*.

To the *weak* I became *weak*,
so that I might *win* the *weak*.

I have become *all things to all people* [he said],
so that I might *by any means*
save some.

As the leader of the Christian movement, Paul would stretch as far as he could in one direction to bring someone into the community of the church and then stretch as far as he could in another direction to bring someone else into the church. He did so not simply so they would have their human need for *community* met by the church – but also so that they might grow deeper in their belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Redeemer of the human race, the expected and promised Messiah. “I have become all things to

⁶ Acts 9.

all people, so that I might by any means *save* [not all but] *some*.” Academic faculty member. Gun club member. You. Me.

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Thus, my answer to the question “Why Church?” is this: The church can *satisfy* the human need for community, but it is *unique* in being that community in which people find their place in the promise Christ offers. The church is that community in which – to use words Paul would later use – people “work out their salvation in fear and trembling,”⁷ in awe and wonder, in hope and joy. The church is not just a community, but a unique community.

III.

In the early 1990s I knew two men. Both were retired. Both were in their seventies. Both were healthy and active in the church I served. But in other ways they could not have been more different. One had been a small town banker: distinguished, silver-haired, smooth in tongue and manner. The other had been aeronautical engineer. He was blunt, sometimes combative. A difficult but devoted person.

Besides membership in the same congregation, these two men shared one other aspect of life, an aspect neither knew about the other. Decades earlier each had discovered the body of their respective twenty-something daughters, each felled by violent death, one at her own hands, one at the hands of another whose identity was never solved.

When the banker was once expressing frustration to me over the attitude the engineer brought to a committee on which they each served, I suggested they might have a common bond. A few weeks later, at the end of another tense meeting, I noticed him reach across the space between their two chairs, touch the engineer on the knee, and say: “We have something in common. Let’s go to lunch.” They walked across the street to a diner together.

I do not know for a certainty what they talked about, in that lunch, or subsequent lunches they had. But I do know that future meetings of the committee on which they sat were less tense. I suspect that at some point in their breaking of bread together they spoke of their similar tragedies, and of ways the church and faith they held in common helped them survive.

Human community, yes. But also the *community of the church* in which each “work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, in tragedy and mystery.”

The “why” of “church.”

Amen.

⁷ Philippians 2:12-13.