

Church on the Mall
September 27, 2015
Rev. Sarah A. Colwill
Proverbs 27:1-10
Ephesians 4:17-5:2

“Building up the Body of Christ (part 3/3)”

One of the current trends in churches around the country is that less and less people find membership meaningful. Now this is separate from the trend of less people coming to church; this is about the people who do come not officially joining. This tendency can be attributed to several things. For one, rather than commit to a particular congregation, some Christians opt to get their different needs met in different places. There’s the church to go to for the good music; the one that has the good preaching; the one with the great Bible study.

And on the other hand, we also have folks not officially joining churches because they feel there’s just no reason to. Decades ago membership to a particular church was part of one’s identity. It meant something to belong to the First Church of Such and Such, or the United Church of So and So. Almost like a country club, church membership was part of one’s identity. This is no longer the case, and to claim membership to a congregation just doesn’t seem to be any different from saying you attend there. For these reasons and others, some people are opting to just go to church, sometimes more regularly than official members, without actually taking the step of membership.

Millennials, that generation of young adults born in the 1980's and later (I just missed the cut-off!!), are infamous for being non-joiners. In every area of life. Partially because of the abundance of choices, they are reluctant to commit, for fear that something better will come along. And unfortunately even when they do choose, they are less likely to be satisfied because of the FOMO effect: the fear of missing out. With so many choices of what to do, what to wear, where to eat, who to date, where to go to church all at their fingertips – there's always the lurking thought that you chose wrong and you could be doing something better, or dating someone that's a better fit, or eating something tastier, or attending a church with better music or a better preacher or better coffee hour refreshments.

So where does that leave the church, as we seek to be a congregation in today's changing world? Amy Frykholm is a contemporary writer on the intersection of church and culture and she talks about her own hesitance to officially join a congregation, even though she was heavily immersed in its mission and ministry. She eventually hones in on the thing that does bring her meaning in being part of a church community – it gives her a sense of belonging. The church is where we discover we belong. This is the place where we are home. We gather around this table to be fed, we read God's word of grace and mercy and love in our Scriptures, we nurture and support one another in Christian fellowship. Here, everyone has a place at the table. Here, God's story is not just a story of the past, but it is your story and my story. Here, you are seen and called by name. Here is where you belong.

Ms. Frykholm eventually did decide to join a church in Colorado, which found her gathered with other soon-to-be members in an adult confirmation class. This particular session had them sharing part of their faith story as it related to a certain Bible story. She writes, “The confirmation class gathered in the community room, 15 of us around a long table. I poured myself a cup of coffee so I would have something to cling to while people talked. I looked at my fellow confirmands and felt it strange to be there. I knew their stories, which included experiences of sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic abuse, drug abuse, and alcoholism. I saw brokenness and loneliness and people scratching out their lives. With a Ph.D., I was the most educated person in the room, and that made precisely not one iota of difference. Somehow we were all washed up on this shore in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, like people from a shipwreck.” (*The Christian Century*, 9/16/15, pg. 26)

Sometimes the struggles of our lives may have us feeling that same way – that we have washed up on the shores of Church on the Mall, shipwrecked from the world’s storms. We have skeletons in our closets, we have guilt from poor decisions that we knew better than to make, we have missed opportunities from fear and indecision, we wrestle with hopelessness from health issues, grief that won’t seem to go away, relationships with family members that have gone awry. We have fear of a loved one’s health issue, worry about our own aging. God has called us together to this place, broken people in need of redemption; broken people eager to be nourished by the bread of life and the cup of salvation; broken people who will be redeemed and restored by

God's goodness and grace poured out to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Together, here in this place, we come together to be the people of God, belonging first to him, but also belonging to one another.

The gifts we receive from God are not intended to stop with our reception of them, but we are commanded to share them with one another – to love one another as God first loved us; to forgive one another as Christ has first forgiven us. As we invest our time, talent, and treasure to build up the body of Christ here at Church on the Mall, we are called to live into this spirit of embodying for one another the relationship that God has with each of us. Every person who walks through these sanctuary doors, whether for the first time or the 500th time, should feel equally wanted, loved, accepted, respected, and welcomed. Whether they are rich or poor, mentally unstable or Ph.D. educated, homeless or living in a mansion, wearing battered clothing or \$300 jeans, someone who has it all together or someone hungover from a night of bad decisions: everyone is welcome here, everyone belongs.

Congregations develop personalities, as I'm sure you all know, which take on a life of their own. Congregations have spirits about them, an energy that is sometimes hard to explain, but sets the tone for the entire community. I once went to a large, program-size church where there was lots going on during a Sunday morning. I was wandering in to worship and people were coming and going with haste: so much to do! The associate pastor was busily heading here and there; I ended up passing him in the hallway on two separate occasions and nodding politely both times. Two times he

encountered a person he did not recognize before worship and two times he didn't stop to introduce himself or welcome me. His priority was the program – leading Sunday school, or preparing for worship, whatever it was he was doing. I've also gone to a service where I introduced myself on the way out as a visitor and the greeter said, well, I guess we're all just visitors, aren't we?

How do we, here at Church on the Mall, cultivate an environment, an energy, a spirit, where everyone feels the belonging, love, and acceptance of Jesus Christ? Our passage in Ephesians has some things to say about this. When we cross the threshold of this church, passing from the mall to the lobby, we are entering a different space; a space that has unwritten rules about how we treat one another, no matter who the other happens to be. While we have not signed on to a covenant per se, we call each other brothers and sisters in Christ because we are more than individuals here; we are a family of faith. We have unwritten rules that orchestrate how we cultivate a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love. We have unwritten rules that promote an environment where all are welcome and where each person feels safe. And the only thing that would preclude one's welcome is if or when that person doesn't live into the rules and threatens the safety and welcome of others.

The list the author of Ephesians comes up with includes the following:

1. Speaking truth to your neighbor.
2. Not sinning when we are angry, although being angry is okay!
3. Not stealing from one another.

4. Working honestly so as to have enough to give away to those in need.
5. No evil talk coming from our mouths.
6. Being kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving one another.

When we cross the threshold of the church, stepping from the mall into our lobby, we cross into a sacred space where we treat one another differently than we are treated in the world

. I often grumble to my children when getting my mail and looking through all the solicitations and catalogues that it's just more people wanting something from me. They don't care who I am, what gifts I have, what my calling is, how busy I am, or how much money I have – they just want to take from me. The world will suck us dry if we allow it to. We live in a society that is transactional: I will do something for you, but what are you going to do for me in return? I will get to know you, if knowing you will somehow benefit me. I will take the time to help you if I know you will now owe me a favor down the road.

Here in this place, we care who you are: your name, your gifts, your passions, your abilities. Here in this place, we do not help you expecting something in return. Here in this place, we are kind and tenderhearted and not because every interaction is a chance to network.

A few years ago I led a day-long women's retreat in northern New Jersey for a Presbyterian church. To get the day started, I asked each woman to share their name and something about themselves, leaving the instructions intentionally ambiguous.

They could share anything about themselves. Each person there – every person – said their name and how many years they had been a member at their church. I found that very curious that they chose to share what could have been an arbitrary number. But it wasn't arbitrary to them; to them it meant something – there was power in that number. As was the case in so many churches, the higher the number the greater the social status. The people who have been in churches the longest often have the clout to make important decisions and they somehow feel more entitled to what happens in the church as if it is more theirs than someone who has been going to the church for only a few months.

The opinions of those with seniority are weighed much more heavily than those of the new-comers. No wonder the church struggles to attract new members. With this kind of a social ladder, new members have to stick around for years until they feel they really belong or like their opinions matter. Plus, with younger generations being more and more transient, will young adults even join a church if they know the 3 years they'll be there will just be spent trying to prove themselves as equals? Not coincidentally, the women of this particular church were wrestling with how to attract new members both to their church and to their women's group. The biggest complaint was that the younger moms just weren't committed enough to the church.

This is not my church and this is not your church. This is Christ's church and we are all equally invited to come and be his disciple together in community with one

another. A first time visitor belongs here and can claim this as home just as much as any one of us.

As we seek to build up the body of Christ here at Church on the Mall, let us take to heart the word to the early church in Ephesus. May we speak the truth to our neighbor, even when we don't agree. We don't need to go along to get along, but our bond in Christ is one that can withhold disagreements and differences of opinion. May we keep from sinning when we are angry, instead finding ways to calm our tensions when we get frustrated with one another. May we refrain from having evil talk coming from our mouths, instead working to build one another up in Christian love, encouraging each other. May we be kind, knowing that we each have come upon these shores, shipwrecked from the storms of the world. May we be tenderhearted, refraining from judgment and instead showing compassion, understanding, and care. May we forgive one another when we mess up, knowing that none of us is perfect and that we will hurt each other's feelings; we will step on one another's toes; we will make each other mad. This, my friends, is what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ. This is what it means to create an environment where any and every Christian knows they belong here. We have been generously gifted this place to feel loved, accepted, and wanted. It is a gift we first receive from God, but they also embody for one another.

We have spent the past three weeks studying this beautiful passage in Ephesians that defines the church as the body of Christ, giving us the identity of the hands and feet of Christ in the world, looking to him as our one true head. It reminds us that we have

each been given gifts to build up this body of Christ, and it encourages us to speak the truth in love and to live into the one hope of our calling. We have been encouraged, friends, for the next year of ministry and mission here at Church on the Mall. We have been given the task of continuing the work of Jesus Christ. We have been given the gifts and talents to do this work. We have been called both personally and communally to be a disciple gathered together in this congregation. May we live into our calling with hope and conviction, working to cultivate an atmosphere where all people know they belong here just as much as any one of us.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Thanks be to God! Amen.