

“What Church Is About” (Ephesians 4:1-16) Pentecost 9, August 2, 2009

This man tells a pastor he wants to become a church member. “But,” he says, “I want to make sure that I find the right kind of church.” “That makes sense,” the pastor says, “What kind of church are you looking for?” “Well,” the man says, “I want a church that will be there for me when I need it but won’t ask me to worship regularly, study the Bible, contribute money, do visitation, or serve on any committees.” The pastor tells him, “To be honest, my church probably isn’t what you’re looking for, but there is one on the other side of town that fits your description perfectly.” So the man writes down the address, then drives over to check it out. And what does he find? It is the kind of church he described. There’s just one problem. It’s abandoned, boarded up, and ready for demolition!

This is just a story, of course, but unfortunately, that man’s attitude is all too real and all too common! These days, many people simply do not understand what church is about. Nor do they understand what being a member is about. And frankly, I believe that’s because many people don’t understand what the Christian life is about. That’s the root of the problem.

If a person thinks that being a Christian means “getting saved,” then living the way they always have, pretty much like everyone else, being a church member won’t mean much. Basically, they’ll see themselves as customers and expect the church to serve them. Sure, they may show up for church now and then, toss a few bucks in the plate, help out with this or that – as they would with any other club – but still, they’ll mainly expect the church to serve them. If it serves them well, they’ll be happy members. If it doesn’t, they can look elsewhere. After all, there are plenty of other churches with livelier music, cooler pastors, funnier sermons, a better class of folks. They can try out as many as they like – until the time comes, of course, when they have to go meet their Maker, at which point they’ll need some specific church to hold their funeral and some specific pastor to tell what wonderful customers they were. I mean, what wonderful Christians.

As I said, this attitude is very common, but it is light years away from what the Bible teaches! God did not save us just to have us go on living the way we are. If He were content with us the way we are, why would He bother to save us? No, God saved us because He wants something better for us – something infinitely better than just living for “me,-myself-and-I.” What God has in mind is an amazing transformation! He wants to move us beyond our natural selfishness to fulfill our true potential. He wants to make our lives and character more and more like Jesus’. He wants us to be filled to overflowing with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control! That’s what God wants. And to make us *into* what He wants, God has put us in a place beautifully suited for carrying out His work – a place where He can smooth away our rough edges, mold our character, and transform us according to His will. That place is called the church. And His tools are people – imperfect but growing people like ourselves. As we work together, worship together, reach out

together, God uses all of it to change us into the kind of people He wants us to be. And I do mean all of it – not just our successes, but our failures, too; even interpersonal friction. He uses all of it to shape us more and more “**into the fullness of the stature of Christ.**” At least, that’s the plan. That’s what can happen if we’re open to it, if we cooperate. God won’t force us into spiritual “**maturity,**” but that’s what He wants – so that’s what a Christian life is about, that’s what being a member is about, and largely, that’s what church is about.

Now, the skeptic in us may wonder why God has chosen to work this way. Couldn’t He just change us privately, on our own terms, without us having to deal with anyone else? That might seem preferable, but actually, it would sabotage His plan. For you see, that’s precisely the kind of attitude God wants to get rid of. He wants us to stop focusing so much on me-myself-and-I and start focusing more on the needs of others, especially others who might not be like us...and whom we might not like. This kind of change can’t happen in private, only in relationships with real people – people not necessarily of our own choosing, like people we find in church. So I suspect that’s why God did not make church membership optional. The way He’s arranged things, when you become a Christian, you’re baptized into a church. Not some personal “holy zone,” not some private “Christian-sphere,” but a fellowship of flesh-and blood human beings, a church. And make no mistake! This is not something separate from the Christian life, something you can take or leave. Like it or not, if you’re a Christian, you’re a member of the church, and if you’re a member of the church, you’re responsible for other members of the church. In fact, this life together is key to our growth, key to the kind of change God has in mind. That’s why God calls us into church life and gives us no way to wiggle out of it. The only question is whether we will live lives “**worthy**” of the calling to which we have been called.

This brings us to our text. Paul writes to the Ephesians: “**I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.**” In Ephesians, Paul actually writes three chapters on what church is about, but here he spells out basic principles: what we’re called to do, who is called to do it, how we’re to go about it, and what’s the ultimate goal. From start to finish, Paul leaves no room for a “customer mentality,” expecting to be served. To the contrary! He says it’s the members who are called to do the “**work of ministry;**” it’s the members who are responsible for “**building up the body of Christ.**” The pastors’ and teachers’ job is simply to “**equip**” them. He also says members are responsible for “*climate control*” – making sure everyone works together “**with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**” That, Paul says, is what it means to live lives “**worthy**” of the calling to which we have been called. It means the doing the right things, doing them in the right spirit, and doing them together. So that’s what he encourages the Ephesians to do.

Now, this would have come as no surprise to them, and it should come as no surprise to. This was Jesus’ own approach. Remember, Jesus did not call

twelve “customers.” He called twelve disciples, who expected to learn and grow through following Him. And Jesus definitely didn’t treat them as customers! If they signed on expecting to be served, they quickly learned otherwise! When the disciples did well, Jesus affirmed them. When they didn’t, Jesus rebuked them. And in every situation, His goal was not their comfort but their growth – which He promoted through on-the-job training. How did they learn to preach? They watched Jesus do it, then He sent them out to do it themselves. How did they learn to minister? They watched Jesus do it, then He sent them out to do it themselves. That’s also how they learned attitude adjustment, battling selfishness, and caring about others! Through on-the-job training, the disciples were equipped for ministry. Then on Pentecost Jesus anointed them with the Spirit and let them loose on the world. The world hasn’t been the same since!

Knowing this, and knowing this is what church is about, Paul begs the Ephesians to operate the same way: **“I...beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”** Now, usually Paul was not one to beg. This is huge! Why he did in this case we can only guess, but at the very least, Paul knew what a difference it makes when folks do remember what church is about and when they don’t. He knew all too well from experience!

On the negative side, there were the Corinthians. What gifted people! What splendid resources! What opportunities for outreach they had! All wasted, of course, because these folks were so self-centered! *“Serve me! Coddle me! Indulge me! Agree with me!”* That was the mantra at Corinth! And how they loved to divide into groups! And identify with former leaders! And play “holier than thou!” And bash anyone who didn’t go along with them! Yes, if there was ever a worst-case scenario showing what happens when folks don’t remember what church is about, it was the Corinthians!

And his best-case scenario? That would probably be the Philippians. These folks weren’t as rich or as gifted as the Corinthians, yet, what a powerhouse congregation! And what a difference they made – the first church in Europe! Sure, they had their problems, too. Euodia and Synteche come to mind. But the thing is, the Philippians dealt with that kind of stuff. They dealt with it together, **“speaking the truth in love,”** and they carried out ministry together, showing just how much you can accomplish when you do remember what church is about.

So in our text, Paul begs the Ephesians to follow that model, and his words come down just as powerfully to us: **“I beg you to live lives worthy of the calling to which you have been called.”** So what does this mean for us today? Let’s talk about it. This is a tough time, no two ways about it. With this economy, many of us have taken a big hit financially. As if that were not bad enough, many of us are dealing with family problems, sicknesses, the ravages of old age, the loss of loved ones. Then we come to church, and of course, the church has also taken a big hit financially, which affects our programs, and on top of that, right now we’re minus two pastors. At such times, how easy it is to glom onto what’s

wrong with the church! How easy it is to major in the minors! And – if I may be frank – how easy it is to ask, “Well, Pastor, what are you going to do about it?” What can I say? Obviously, one pastor cannot do the work of three. Even if I could, I’m not sure that would be the best solution. Instead, I think this might be just the right time to make a virtue of necessity and re-think how we do ministry. Maybe it’s time for me to segue more into the biblical role of pastor: “**equipping the saints for ministry**” – that is, training members to do some things that pastors have been doing but don’t necessarily need to do.

For instance, take visitation. Here at RLC, we have more than 30 members who are shut-in and are used to having a pastor bring them Communion. There is no way I can do everything else and visit them as often as they deserve. What I can do, however, is train some of our members to bring Communion to shut-ins, and I think that would be a meaningful ministry. So that’s one plan. We’ll call this group **Eucharistic Visitors**. Each month, I will supply a liturgy and a brief devotion, then using the elements consecrated at a regular service, members will visit fellow members with Communion. And do know what I would really like? I’d really like for people not to see this as lightening the pastor’s load, but as members claiming the “**work of ministry**,” work that rightfully belongs to them; members “**building up the body of Christ**.” For that is what church is about.

Here are some other possibilities. If you know someone is sick or expecting surgery, let me know, too. If you’re willing to help with something, volunteer instead of waiting to be asked. If you know folks who haven’t been worshipping, take the bull by the horns and invite them to come back. Be patient, even forgiving, when things don’t go smoothly. And pray – pray for me, pray for our staff, pray for our leaders, pray for our call committee, pray for individual members. Prayer is so important! And it’s also the “**work of ministry**.” It’s also “**building up the body of Christ**.” It’s also what church is about.

So you get the point. Often, we focus on peripheral stuff – property and programs, policies and procedures -- but they’re just means to an end. What church is about is being a spiritual family that works together, worships together, reaches out together. What church is about is sharing the work of ministry and building up each other in love. What church is about is creating an environment where people can change and spiritual growth can happen. It’s not about being served...or being perfect. It’s about being there for the Lord and for each other.

That said, let me end with a poem that beautifully sums up the point of our text:

<i>I think that I shall never see</i>	<i>Where all are always sweet and kind</i>
<i>A church that’s all it ought to be;</i>	<i>And to each other’s faults are blind.</i>
<i>A church whose income’s never bleak;</i>	<i>Such perfect churches there may be,</i>
<i>And no one’s proud, but all are meek;</i>	<i>But none of them are known to me.</i>
<i>Where gossips never peddle lies</i>	<i>So let’s just work and pray and plan</i>
<i>Or make complaints or criticize;</i>	<i>To make our church the best we can!</i>

