

Tough Questions/Real Answers: EQUIPPING THE SAINTS

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-13

What good is the church?

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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Have you ever been to a good funeral? Sometimes the memorial service for someone is so good it's hard to remember that you're supposed to be sad. In her novel, *Cold Sassy Tree*, Olive Ann Burns has a character who is the patriarch of a large family. As he anticipates his imminent demise, he advises his family on what type of service he wants, and he says, "Remember, the first three letters in funeral spell fun."¹ The first word in "funeral" is "fun." Some are, and some are not at all.

A few years ago I held two very different funerals on the same day. The first funeral was a graveside service held for a family member of some members of my church. The man who had died had led a tragic life, plagued by the demon of drug addiction for over thirty years. His conflicts with friends and family and his abusive ways had alienated just about everyone. His funeral was attended by three relatives and a couple of their friends and a friend of the man's mother. His mother was in the hospital and couldn't attend; his own father chose not to attend. At the graveside, we prayed for forgiveness—that God would be merciful and gracious to this man, and that his family members and friends would find it in their hearts to forgive him and not to carry the burden of resentment and hostility. It was a sad and painful time.

That afternoon I helped with a very different kind of funeral. It was a celebration of the life of Rev. Gerald Hammett. His grandson Hammett Evans was my associate pastor at the time. Gerald was a pastor in the United Methodist Church for forty years; he served churches all over North Arkansas and was a District Superintendent. There was an abundance of happy memories and great times to recall and celebrate. The service in the First United Methodist Church of Beebe was full of friends and colleagues in ministry. There was a Willie Nelson song; the choir sang, and his other grandson played "When the Saints Go Marching In" on his trombone. When we closed the service with a prayer to commend the spirit of Gerald Hammett to his heavenly Father, all the clergy in the service—about 20 of us—stood and read the prayer together, including Gerald's daughter and grandson, both United Methodist pastors. It was the perfect closure for a life lived in

community and ministry. It was a good funeral, like many of the celebrations we have had for our saints here in this church.

What made the difference between those two services, between those two lives? What makes one life end on a tragic and unfulfilled note, while another closes like a good book, where you sigh because you're sad it's over, yet you appreciate the skill with which it was done? Obviously, there are a lot of factors involved. Heredity, environment, and personal moral choices have a great deal to do with how a person's life turns out. But I think another factor that had a fundamental effect, at least on the life of Gerald Hammett, was the church. In the first funeral, I don't think the man had ever been involved in a church. Gerald lived his entire life totally involved in the community of faith. While that's not the only thing, it was a very important thing that made his life what it was.

Today's tough question is, "What good is the church?" What difference does it make to be a part of the church? How can it help us to be involved? How can it hurt us if we are not? Why would anyone want to be part of an organization like this?

Even though most people still profess a belief in God and consider themselves spiritual people, many don't want anything to do with the church anymore; they are SBNR's—spiritual but not religious.

Skeptics point to the bad history of the church as a reason not to get involved in an organization as corrupt as the church is. History chronicles well the sins of the church. Scandals abound. Even in our personal histories and local church situations, we see that the church is an organization made up of humans, and therefore sinners. All the pettiness and divisiveness and meanness that goes along with being human also affects the church. We know people who have been hurt by the church; we *are* some of those people. Sometimes the hurt is so painful that a person will leave the fellowship altogether.

In *The Upper Room*, I read a devotional by a man from Oklahoma who had a child who was a picky eater. When he would get mad at his parents, he would refuse to eat. By doing so, he obviously thought his parents would starve, or at least feel the pain of his not eating, when all he was doing was punishing himself. People do the same thing with the church. They get mad at God or mad at the preacher or mad at something else in the church, and they respond to their hurt by getting out, by leaving the fellowship of the community, thinking that their retaliation will injure the one who hurt them. In reality, of course, they are only starving themselves.²

The church is full of human dysfunction; why would anybody want to be a part of one?

On the other hand, where else can we go to get what we can get in a church? Historically, the church has many blemishes, but it has also provided the moral framework of our culture for 2,000 years. The essential dignity of every human person is an idea the church gave our society. Think of the schools, the hospitals, the homeless shelters, the battered women's shelters, the missions, the relief organizations, the orphanages, and the food pantries—who runs those? The atheists? No, the churches.

Despite the fact that the church is full of sinners, where do you find the best people in all the world—people who dedicate their lives to service, who love others, who give of themselves and their goods, who sacrifice their own well-being for the good of others? Where? The church! Sometimes you see the worst of humanity in the church, but sometimes, by the grace of God, we get it right. We do exactly what Jesus would do, and you see in the church a community of faith and hope and love that is unlike any other organization in the world. Who *wouldn't* want to be a part of a community like that?

Let me share with you three words today that I think are the three reasons we need to be part of a church. The first is **COVENANT**. Covenant comes from an ancient word that is related to the idea of a fetter or a leg iron. A covenant is an agreement made in faith. It is an agreement made in a moment of strength, so that in a moment of weakness, it cannot be undone. Like a fetter that is locked, we can't get out of it.

In that sense, marriage is a similar covenant. When we get married, we make a vow before God and the church to be in a covenant relationship with our spouse “for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish until we are parted by death.”³ I tell couples before they are married that there will come a time when they roll over in bed one morning and think to themselves, “Now why was it I married this person?” The tides of human emotions ebb and flow; we don't always feel romantic or “in love” or even extremely happy with our marriage. Tough times come for everybody. In those times, the covenant is what keeps us together. When you're struggling with making a living and raising children and dealing with life, you don't always look at each other like Prince Charming and Sleeping Beauty, but that doesn't mean you're not married. There is a covenant, an agreement based on faith, that continues no matter what you are feeling at any particular moment. It's the covenant that holds you steadfast when the feelings fail.

Sometimes the church is not like a fairy tale, either. Sometimes church is just not that much fun. If you've just spent two hours in the nursery or spent the night with the youth group or sat through a two-hour Trustees meeting, you may not jump up and down and say, “That was the most spiritual experience of my life!” You may even leave church occasionally on Sunday morning and not feel inspired to change the world. Or you may get into situations every once in a while that just hurt your feelings. The poet wrote, “To live above with the saints we love, that would be a glory. But to dwell below with the saints we know, now that's a different story.”⁴ What are you going to do?

If you are in a covenant relationship with God through the church, you can't just walk away. If you're hurt or bored or tired, you just hang on and continue in the relationship and work to make things better, and one day the romance will come back. The inspiration will return. The Spirit will energize your walk, and you can carry on. But it won't happen without a commitment to the covenant that holds us steady.

The second reason to be in the church is **SUPPORT**. When the tough times come—a death, an illness, a divorce, the loss of a job—we need a source of strength. When the storms blow, we need a safe harbor. That's what the fellowship of the church is all about. When the church is doing its job, people find in this community a support that they cannot find anywhere else, except maybe family, but that doesn't always work, either. I don't know how many times I have heard the comment, which was said to me again this week, “I don't know how I would have made it without my church family.” The truth is, you wouldn't make it as well.

However, the support of the community of faith is not just for the troubled times of life. The church also encourages us in our walk by providing resources for us to grow in our faith—worship, small groups, service opportunities. And the church is there to celebrate our victories as well. That's important, too.

Robert Neff tells about visiting a church for the early service one morning, and it was obvious that the teenage boy who was supposed to sing a solo had not had a chance to warm up his vocal cords. His faltering voice was weak and wavering near the right pitch, but not quite on it. As Robert looked around, he noticed members of the church pulling

out their hymnals to locate the hymn being sung by the young man. By the second verse, the congregation had joined the soloist in the hymn. By the third verse, the singer had begun to find his voice. By the fourth verse, he was doing well. But on the fifth verse, a really neat thing happened. The congregation quit singing, and the young man sang the most beautiful solo of his life. When he finished, the congregation clapped. That's the support of the church, helping us to sing the tune until we can carry it on our own, and then celebrating the gift.⁵

That brings us to the third reason for being a part of the church: **MINISTRY**. Being in the church puts us in a position to be in ministry for the Kingdom of God. While our service to God may be done outside the church, it is done through the fellowship of the faith.

This is the thrust of the Ephesians passage we read this morning. Paul begs the believers to “*lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*”⁶ Each of us is called to ministry, and God has given us gifts to do God's ministry. So this is the job of the church: “*to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.*”⁷ Equipped with gifts, we work to build up the church. Doing the work, we find the unity of the fellowship and maturity in our faith. That's how the community of the saints is supposed to function.

On this All Saints' Sunday, we need to do more than just remember those who have died and finished their ministry. As Dr. Len Sweet says, “All Saints' Day is NOT about recalling great spiritual leaders and teachers who have gone on ahead. All Saints' Day is a day to dedicate ourselves anew to INCREASING the number of saints in our quaky, shaky churches.”⁸ In ministry through the church, we can be part of something eternally meaningful, something bigger than ourselves, something that belongs to God.

Are you a part of something that is bigger than your own little circle of work and influence and feelings? If you want to be, the church offers you a covenant of faith to connect you with the Kingdom of God. The church wants to support you in good times and bad. The church wants to put you in ministry, according to your gifts, to equip the saints and build up the body of Christ—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until you are parted by death, and you become one of the saints in glory. That is the real answer for a life that makes a difference!

¹ Olive Ann Burns, *Cold Sassy Tree* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2007).

² Norman Styers, “Striking Back,” *The Upper Room*, October 27, 2003.

³ “A Service of Christian Marriage,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), p. 867.

⁴ Joseph L. Garlington in *Right or Rconciled? God's Heart for Reconciliation*, on *Preachingplus.com*.

⁵ Robert Neff, *Witnesses of a Third Way: A Fresh Look at Evangelism*, cited by John Unger, *Leadership*, Vol. 11, No. 4.

⁶ Ephesians 4:1.

⁷ Ephesians 4:12-13.

⁸ Leonard Sweet, “For ALL the Saints,” sermon November 1, 2001, www.preachingplus.com.