

“A Tradition and Future of Being Present”

Acts 2:37-47

October 11, 2009

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A man was coming out of church one day, and the preacher was standing at the door as he always was to shake hands. The preacher grabbed the man by the hand, pulled him aside and said to him, “You need to join the Army of the Lord!” The man replied, “I’m already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor.” Pastor questioned, “How come I don’t see you except at Christmas and Easter?” He whispered back, “I’m in the secret service.”¹

We all know our share of Secret Service Christians, don’t we? Of course, since it’s not Christmas or Easter, none of us qualify as Secret Service Christians.

We’re in our second week of our annual stewardship campaign as we look at the commitments we will make to faithfully participate in the life of the church in the coming year through our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness. Last week, we thought about our commitment to pray. This week, we’re focusing on our commitment to being present.

Throughout the Bible, we are reminded again and again for our need for community and connection with one another. In the very beginning, there’s this great scene where Adam is hanging out by himself, all alone. God says, it’s not good for him to be alone, so God creates all the animals and parades them in front of Adam, but none is found to be suitable for him. Finally, God creates Eve, and Adam says, “At last! Here’s someone that is like me. The first real community was born.

In the passage we read from the book of Acts today, the Christian community was just organizing after the day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit had just come upon the disciples like tongues of fire. Peter gave a rousing sermon and three thousand people believed and were baptized. It was the beginning of the church. The first Christian community was being formed.

So let’s take a look at what kind of community is recorded in that passage. What did the first Christians do? They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, they spent much time together in the temple. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

They gathered together continually, praying with one another, breaking bread with one another, studying with one another. They were devoted to one another and to their spiritual growth. It was a group effort. Our text this morning reminds us that we are called as Christians and as members of the church to be fully present with and for one another. This goes deeper than just showing up for church.

¹ “When Third Place is the Right Place” www.homileticsonline.com

Have you ever had the experience of talking to someone, and you just get the feeling that they haven't been paying any attention to you at all? If you asked them what you just finished saying, they wouldn't be able to answer? I think we've all shared that experience at one time or another, and if we're honest, we probably have been that person that wasn't paying attention.

A commitment to being present means being there with all that you've got. It isn't in some passive sense that you're just there. It is giving everything to the experience. How much more powerful would worship be if we were fully present to the experience instead of making our to-do lists or otherwise mentally checking-out. How much more would we get out of our Bible studies if we were fully present to them? How much more powerful would our many ministries be? When I think about these questions, it makes me wonder just how much we limit God's ability to work through us when we are not fully present to God and to one another.

Throughout our campaign this year, we're connecting our membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness to the Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations of Passionate Worship, Intentional Faith Development, Extravagant Generosity, Risk-Taking Mission and Radical Hospitality. Our commitment to be present is lived out in our intentional faith development. There are two elements of the phrase "Intentional Faith Development" that I think are important to consider.

First is the faith development part. I fully believe that faith is a journey and not a destination. There is always something new to learn, something new to experience, something new to understand about God. There are always questions to be asked, experiences to share, discoveries to be found. Faith is not about simply agreeing to a specific set of doctrinal statements. Faith is about an ever growing relationship with the God of the universe. I think we're in danger if we think we've ever fully arrived at the final destination of faith.

A life of faith is not a solo journey. A life of faith is meant to be lived in community with others. When we have others with us for the journey, we can rejoice with them when times are good, we can lean on them when our faith becomes weak, we can learn from them by hearing their unique perspectives, and can accomplish more in service to the world. We can do all this and more, as long as we show up – as long as we follow through on our commitment to one another to be present.

And that brings us to the second element of the phrase that I think is important to consider: the word *intentional*. Why is the word *intentional* included in the phrase "Intentional Faith Development?" I think it's because the word *intentional* refers to deliberate effort. Let's face it. It can take commitment simply to be present. Life can get in the way. There are so many other things that we could do with our time, so many other places we could be. We must be intentional about our faith development. We must be deliberate. We must make a commitment to it, or else life will get in the way, and we will find other things to take up our time.

Our society is filled with different ways we try to connect with one another and build community. There are social clubs and fraternal organizations that many of us belong to. There are coffeehouses where people hang out together, bars where everybody knows your name, sports teams that connect people on a regular basis. In the past few years, the need for community has gone online with chat rooms, discussion boards, Facebook with its status updates and Twitter with its Tweets. In all of these various ways, we seek to know and be known. We seek connection with other people.

It would seem to make sense then, that when we agree to become a member of an organization, that organization would expect us to make a commitment to being present. We want to know that the other people who are in the community with us have a commitment to being a part of the community we share.

A wise person I know once said, “Being a Christian is like being a Buckeye fan. If you’re a true Buckeye fan, you want to be in the stadium when they play. Hearing about it later, reading about it or even watching it on TV just isn’t the same. There ain’t nothin’ like bein’ there.”

Now, much to my disbelief, not everybody feels that way about the Buckeyes. If you’re one of those folks who isn’t blindingly passionate about the Buckeyes, I’ll bet that there’s something in your life that you just love, that you could describe by saying “There ain’t nothin’ like bein’ there.”

When I have made myself fully present to God, I have always come away saying, “There ain’t nothin’ like bein’ there.” That’s the good news. Here’s the bad news. Being fully present to God is risky. It might require that we give up control over something in our life. It might require that we fully let the Spirit lead us. It might require that we be available to other people in their need. The power of God cannot be fully experienced if we are not fully present.

Maple Grove has a wonderful tradition of being present with and for one another. You saw that displayed in the slideshow we watched earlier in worship. What kind of possibilities does the future hold for Maple Grove when all of us commit to be present?

This month, as you are evaluating your commitments to the church in the coming year, I’d like you to ask yourself this question: What is my next step? What is the next step for you in your commitment to participate in the ministries of the church with your presence? Maybe it’s to come to Sunday morning worship more than once or twice per month. Maybe you’re being called to begin to participate in Sunday school or one of the other Christian education opportunities. Maybe it’s that you need to get more active in one of the fellowship groups or to come to more of the community meals or other events we have as a church. What is the next step for you on your journey of faith as you deepen your commitment to God and to the community of faith we call Maple Grove?

I believe God's dream is that we would be fully present with and for one another along our shared journey of faith. God gets the idea of presence. God understands it so well that God sent Jesus to be present with us. In person. In the flesh. John writes, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." The incarnation is the ultimate example of the ministry of presence. God became human and dwelt among us. It is now ours to live incarnationally, to keep Christ's presence alive in the world today. I believe we do that best as a community of faith, sharing life together and being present with and for one another. We have a tradition of that at Maple Grove. Let us continue on that journey into our shared future. Together. Amen.