



“We Are Becoming the Church God Wants Us to Be”
Scripture – 1 Corinthians 12:12-27
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, January 31, 2016

Scott Black Johnson, pastor of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, makes an observation that serves as a metaphor of our times. There is an old black-and-white photograph hanging in the lobby of Fifth Avenue Church that shows long lines of people waiting to get into the church on a Sunday morning back in the 1950’s. Johnson points out that today you can again find long lines on Fifth Avenue. Today the long line is in front of the Abercrombie & Fitch store where people are waiting in line to buy a pair of blue jeans for \$100.

The contrast between then and now speaks volumes about North America culture. Today, secularity dominates spirituality.

Not that many years ago, there was an expectation that your friends and neighbors were members of a church and on Sunday mornings they would be sitting in the pews. Today, you are more likely to find your friends and neighbors watching their children on the sports field, or packing golf clubs and tennis rackets in their cars, or working in the yard or reading the news or catching up on emails.

In the past, when the majority of mothers did not work outside the home, they were more than ready to go to church on Sunday. They were starved for interaction with other adults. Today, many moms who work avoid church because they have had more than enough interaction with adults and are exhausted. Not long ago, singles knew that the church was a wonderful place to find a spouse. Today, singles find their mates on eHarmony.¹

Being a dynamic community of faith is a great deal more challenging than it used to be. The general expectation that people are connected to a religious institution has evaporated. How do we respond to this new reality?

Some recommend a return to the past, and we have certainly inherited a rich religious heritage. Perhaps we should focus on what worked in days gone by and try to duplicate it today.

Christianity has gained much from its rich past. Our scriptures from ancient times remind us of epic events that shaped our understanding of God – the Exodus from Egypt, the period of the prophets, the powerful life and teachings of Jesus. Since the writing of Scripture, numerous theologians have emerged. Our stained glass window in the balcony captures a few of the giants – Augustine and Aquinas, Calvin and Knox, among others.

Their insights have shaped our understanding of the Christian faith. Looking to the past gives us a foundation so that we do not have to make it up as we go or allow the voices of our secular society to dictate our deepest values. However, pining for the past can cripple us.

“Remember when our Sunday school rooms were bulging with children?” “Remember when we had all those circles of Westminster Women?” “Remember when DuPont was thriving and we had a constant influx of new members?” “Remember when most people went to church?”

One way to respond to the great challenges before us is to grieve all that we have lost. We could gather each Sunday and read psalms of lament and recite prayers of sorrow. We could preach about the good old days and sing the blues. I seriously doubt that is what God is calling us to do.

Our past has provided us with a firm foundation, but not a finished house. God calls us into the Body of Christ to create a church for today. Not a church of the first century, nor the fifteenth century nor the 1950s, but a church that speaks to people of the 21st Century.

The challenge before us is hefty. The Christian Church in North America and Europe has been in a steady decline for 40 years. Some left the church as a result of clergy scandals, some because science revealed a world at odds with ancient Christian thought, some because the church was slow to loosen its patriarchal grip on power, some because the church often blasted the bugle about what it was against but only whispered what it was for, and made it clear who it was determined to exclude rather than committing to those it would embrace.

All of us recognize that our society has undergone a slow, but steady shift from supporting spiritual values to rivaling them. In our secular culture, acquiring overshadows giving, being entertained precludes searching for wisdom, seeking pleasure surpasses service to others, and fluff dominates depth.

We would throw in the towel and admit that secularism has scored a convincing victory, except that we have tried its answers and found them flimsy. Human beings long for a purpose greater than simply earning a living. Having the most toys in the neighborhood does not quench the hunger for something more substantial. Having no hope in a power greater than ourselves leads to despair.

We are committed to Christ and we are members of the church because we know that we human beings are more than simple creatures seeking to fulfill physical needs. We are spiritual beings who long for a connection with God and who long for a connection with other people. The church, and Christianity itself, is undergoing major changes, but it will not disappear because people will always have spiritual hungers. That longing is in our DNA.

Secularism has a number of tricks to distract us from the yearnings of our soul – but its ploys have a short shelf life. In the middle of a sleepless night, in the midst of a personal crisis, in the melancholy that materializes from a lack of purpose, and in the looming threat of death, we long for God.

Albert Camus, the French existentialist philosopher, was an atheist for most of his life. What most people do not know is that in his last years, before he died in an automobile accident, he started attending the American Church in Paris. After sitting in worship several Sundays, he began having conversations with the pastor. Several times he told the pastor that he was “dissatisfied with the whole philosophy of existentialism and that he was seeking something he did not have.” He said, “I have been coming to church because I am seeking something to fill the void I am experiencing... the readers of my novels identify with that void, but they are not finding the answer in my writings. I am searching for something that the world is not giving me.”² Sadly, he delayed his spiritual quest too long.

Many are searching. Some delay the search too long, others head down the path marked pure pleasure and come up empty. We must be a community of faith where people can discover what will fill the void within them.

In our passage from 1 Corinthians, Paul writes about the way in which a faith community is like a human body. You know this well. The body is comprised of arms and legs, hands and feet, eyes and ears, that operate in tune with each other. Similarly, a spiritual community is composed of people with different gifts. For the church to become what God wants it to be, we must join together. And when we do, not only is the overall impact greater, each of us excels.

A pastor quipped to his choir director that when he stands in front of the choir and sings a hymn he sounds a lot better than when he sings on his own. The choir director said, "That's because you don't just sound better with strong singers around you, you actually sing better."

So it is with the church. When we are members of the Body of Christ, we can do so much more than we can do on our own, and the other parts of the body help each of us to flourish.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we challenge people to consider the questions they often dodge. Do you really need all that stuff you desire? What will make your life truly rich? Whom do you need to forgive? Do you treat others the way you want to be treated? What can you do to help people who are hurting? What can you do to spread peace? What gives you hope?

We become the church God is calling us to be when we dive into Scripture and theology to discover the wisdom that helps us answer the questions that dog us. At Westminster, we create church school classes around stimulating topics; we talk about the connection between science and religion, and how the Bible speaks to us today. This year's Distinguished Speaker, Matthew Fox, will help us understand Christian mysticism and spirituality. He will be here in April.

The Wilmington community is in terrible shape. There is too much poverty, too many young people dropping out of school and dropping into crime. There is far too much violence. We become the church God is calling us to be when we support children from low income schools by providing new backpacks and school supplies, when members become mentors, and when we provide a safe place for the Urban Promise after school program and summer camp.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we support local food banks, when we serve meals to people who are hungry, when we house people in our church who are temporarily homeless, when we furnish homes for the formerly homeless, and when we construct a Habitat House. We will have a build on our front lawn in May. I hope you will be a part of the effort.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we help men and women overcome their addictions. Each week we open our doors and provide meeting rooms for seven different AA and NA groups. Hundreds of individuals come to these meetings to get help in putting their lives back together.

We are blessed with marvelous facilities. They are beautiful and inspiring. We become the church God is calling us to be when we do not hoard them for ourselves, but open them for ministry and mission.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we visit people in the hospital, drive the elderly to doctors appointments, take communion to those unable to come to worship, and when Stephen Ministers walk with people through difficult times.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we send water filters to Guatemala so that people can drink bacteria-free water.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we gather with people of different faith traditions and create a steel drum band in Israel that brings together Jewish, Christian and Muslim middle-schoolers to make music together and to develop friendships. We are bringing the Peace Drums band here in April. I hope you will see them.

We become the church God is calling us to be when we support people during the significant junctures in their lives – by celebrating births and baptisms and pledging to support them in their faith journey; by celebrating weddings and supporting couples as they begin their lives together; and by helping families celebrate the life of their loved one who has died, point to the hope of the resurrection, and continue to journey with them as they grieve.

When you became a part of Westminster, you committed to following Jesus, but not as a lone wolf. You committed to a spiritual journey with fellow travelers.

God wants us to keep working at making ourselves better, and joining with others in our community of faith to make our world better.

We are becoming the church God wants us to be. May we be open to God's challenges and respond faithfully.

NOTES

1. Carol Howard Merritt, "How Do We Get People to Church?" Carol's blog, Tribal Church at ChristianCentury.org.
2. Howard Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister*, quoted in *The Christian Century*, June 7, 2000, p. 645.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God – You gather us from east and west, north and south, to dwell with you in your sanctuary. We come from far and near, different people with different stories to tell. But we gather around a font and table that unite us. We give thanks that you claim us in the waters of baptism and bind us together as the body of Christ. Pour out your Spirit upon us, like you did on the day of Pentecost, and sustain us for our common calling.

You fashion us as one body with many members, and charge each of us to care for one another. Some among us are suffering, O God. We lift before you those who grieve...those who have lost work and the security it brings; those who have lost loved ones and the joy of companionship; those who have lost hope and the courage to dream. We remember those whose own bodies are weary or worn down, or aching from illness or disease; we remember those who suffer each day from anxiety or addiction. Breathe your Spirit upon all in need of healing, we pray, that they might know your peace and experience your wholeness. And breathe your Spirit upon us, stirring us toward compassion, that we might bring comfort to members of this body in need of care.

Great God, we rejoice in the ways your Spirit is at work among us, giving birth to new life. We give thanks for glimpses of your Kingdom springing forth from seeds we have planted, and celebrate new opportunities to serve. As we look ahead to the future you are revealing to us, help our vision to be your vision. Bless our ministry and mission that all we do may bear witness to your radical love and abundant grace. Bind us together and send us out, in Christ's service, that we may be the church you have called us to be.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, who taught us to pray together: **Our Father...**