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Pentecost 17, September 24, 2023

I am a Christian – Part 2 – “I Am a Church Member”

Read: Hebrews 10: 23 - 25 and/or Memorize Heb. 10: 25

In 1777, right after declaring independence, the Continental Congress established the Articles of Confederation, giving the 13 colonies the name, The United States of America, however they weren't. They were really 13 individual countries, giving very little power to a unified government. Then, in 1789, they established a true federal government, uniting the individual states, working together to make a difference.

Membership in the church does much the same thing, committing us to working together to make a difference. The dilemma is we live in a society that tells us making a difference isn't the big issue. Getting our own needs met is more important.

People may commit to something for a short term to benefit the community but are often reluctant to make a long-term commitment. People often share that it's hard to be at worship because of all the other things calling for their attention.

Before we can make a difference in the world, we need to learn to live differently in the world. That's what church membership helps us to do. We ask people to sign a covenant, explaining how they will live out their relationship to God and each other. Our covenant explains what God expects: gathering, serving, unifying, giving and praying.

You see right from the get go, if we don't gather, we can't do any of those other things. And I think you'll all admit that there is a challenge to gathering. We live in a society that says that me, myself and I, the unholy trinity, should be first and foremost in our lives.

Becoming a church member leads me to put aside the unholy trinity of “me, myself and I” because I choose to put others first. When I am absent I diminish the ability of the church to do the things we just talked about, which are essential to being the church.

Why did God create the church? God created the church to connect us to each other. By that connection we become part of the universal church, all those who believe in Jesus. But our only connection to that universal or catholic church, is through the local church.

We believe that the local congregation is the creation of God. Anything above it is the creation of people to organize work.

God created the church to help us grow. We grow by coming to worship, Bible study, reading scripture, talking and sharing with others and serving together. In that gathering, we get to eat some special food called communion. When we're away from it for a long time, like any other important meal, we grow weaker. That's why the commitment to regular gathering is so vital.

In Acts 4 we hear that the church at that time gathered daily. I suspect they might not have had a sermon every time. On the other hand, maybe they were a sermon to each other. When we slip out of that rhythm of regular worship we also grow weaker.

When people tell me how embarrassed they are that they haven't been to church lately, I always assure them that we miss them and would be glad to welcome them back. Here's the reality, when our commitment to local gathering wanes, our growth in Christ wanes also. We soon find ourselves starving.

Now the commitment to the church is a little different than some other commitments. I'm a member of the Kiwanis Club. It's called a service or civic club. We do good things in the community to help people. To be a member of Kiwanis I have to pay dues. They also expect me to serve. As you can tell, that's a pretty low level of commitment.

Some people belong to country clubs. As a member of the country club, I don't expect to clean the table or the tees. I expect they have people serving me rather than me serving others. People are there to meet my needs because I am a member of the club.

Once again, I pay my dues, but they're likely higher because they have to pay people to serve me. That's one of the big differences: I expect to be served, not to serve. I also expect that that service will meet my standards and preferences. The church is neither a service club or a country club.

The church is the Body of Christ, gathered around the Word and Sacraments, to accomplish God's mission. It seeks to bring people to know and believe in Jesus Christ. To accomplish that we need to be committed to it. It's kind of like getting married.

The church is often called the Bride of Christ. Just imagine if you were getting married and on the day of your wedding you professed your love for your spouse and the joy of being together. Yet, right after the wedding you explain that you like to get away once

and awhile. They'll see you when you decide to come home. That doesn't really sound like "I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you."

When we make a commitment to a spouse we are promising to be with them in the good times and bad times, in sickness and in health. We're saying we will be accountable to them so that they don't have to wonder where we are.

So how important is gathering in the church? Well St. Paul, that guy who wrote almost half of the New Testament spent four chapters on in in 1 Corinthians 11 – 14. Right smack dab in the middle of that section is 1 Corinthians 13.

You may have heard it at a wedding. I know I've read it lot of times at weddings. It's called the love chapter. Paul didn't write it for anybody's wedding. He wrote it because there were problems in the church and people weren't being loving. He was explaining to them, and to us, what it means to be committed to each other. Part of that commitment is to love one another.

In the church, part of our commitment is to be obedient to Scripture, which commands that we gather. When we gather we are being obedient to God which, helps us to grow and become more like Jesus. By practicing obedience, we're reminding ourselves that we have made a commitment to put others above ourselves.

So why do we gather? We gather first of all to serve. Take a look at your body for a second. Put your hand on your heart. If that heart didn't beat every minute of every day do you know what you would be called? Yep, dead. That's not the only part of the body that's pretty essential. When any part of the body doesn't work right, we call that illness. That's why serving is so important. It helps to keep us healthy.

God not only calls us to serve, He equips us to serve. You have abilities and gifts that you are specifically given by God to use in the service of others. When you're using them, they should bring joy to you and those you serve. That's why I say greeters need to smile because it is the most welcoming thing a guest, or anyone else, can receive.

Because we're serving, we're also attending; we're getting together regularly. This is not an appeal to fill the pews so we look good. It is vital to you to receive the benefits of regular worship, the joy and celebration of being in the presence of God with the rest of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul says, "all together we are the body of Christ and each of us is a part of it."

The other thing that's important to the church is that we're unifying. Unity means we understand that our personal opinion should not be the guiding direction for the church. We want to be of one accord in what we are trying to accomplish, which is sharing the love of Jesus Christ with each other and with other people.

In the early church, and in Acts 4 it says that they were unified in heart and mind. They all knew what they were there to do and they loved doing it. It gave them great joy, because they knew that they were serving God by serving others.

The other facet of the church is giving. Now I've had people ask me, "Should I give time, talent or treasure, Pastor?" My answer is, "Yes!" Each of those areas asks us to give of ourselves in certain ways, because they help us understand the importance of giving beyond ourselves.

Is there some number, like 10%, that if I give that much, I can consider my obligation met? No! A gift, offered out of obligation, is no gift at all. It is a duty and there is no joy or obedience in that. Jesus wants your gifts offered freely in response to what He has given you.

When I freely offer my gifts, when I give them from my heart, they are such a blessing to me and to others that I just cannot get over the joy that God gives me. My ability to give is both a gift and an opportunity.

Finally, we want to be praying. As I said last week we're pretty good at that, but there is always room for improvement. There are all sorts of things we can say about prayer, but I'm going to save them for another time. The biggest thing I want to share about prayer is that that is how God's Spirit accomplishes great works through the church.

God created, called and gathered the church to accomplish His purpose of making disciples. You are a part of it when you join your local church and become, "Everyday Disciples – Sharing Christ, Changing Lives!" If you're not a member we're glad you come. But we also realize when you make the decision to come, you can also make the decision not to come. As a committed member, your decision to come each week is your expression of obedience to Jesus.

Count me in: As part of my commitment to Jesus, I will commit to worshiping one additional weekend each month.