

1 Sermon, January 21, 2012

Texts: 1Corinthians 12:12-31, John 15:1-8

Title: "Promises – Church Membership"

1. Here's a sermon that will make nobody happy
3. Cultural change
4. Theologically – what is membership?
5. Practically – what is membership?
6. How does that differ from other memberships?

1. A sermon that will make nobody happy

Today I'm going to preach a sermon that will make nobody happy.

Some of you will be unhappy that I'm not laying it on thick about the duty of being church members.

Some of you will think I'm trying to make you feel guilty. Nope. Not my motivation.

Some of you may think I pay too much attention to the ideals that the Bible presents to us, and not enough attention on the practicalities. Some of you may think the opposite; I'm being too practical.

Anyway, here goes.

3. Cultural change

Membership in the church is a changing phenomenon.

It used to be, 50 years ago, that respectable people who moved to a new town would expect to join a church. It was just something people did. It was like getting a new bank account when you moved.

50 years ago, people would join the church, and then get involved. First they made the commitment, then they followed it up.

Now, people don't trust institutions like they once did. The institutional church no longer seems the only path to salvation. If people do go to church, they'll try it out for a while, and then maybe join if they like what they see.

It's a lot like the cultural change in marriage. It used to be that people got married, then lived together, then had children; now the order gets switched around.

2 Sermon, January 21, 2012

50 years ago, people trusted the government more than they do now, to be a solution rather than a problem.

In the same way, 50 years ago people trusted the church to be a place of warmth and healing, not a place of scandal and abuses.

I could say more; but you get the idea. Membership in an organization is just not as highly valued these days.

Volunteerism is still high. People want to do good. They just don't want to make a commitment to an organization beyond their control.

4. Theologically – what is membership?

Culture changes.

Even the meaning of the word membership has changed.

It used to be that a member was seen as an integral part, like an arm is a member of your body. A member was not separable except by violence. Just think of the word dismember – to take a member away from the body means doing violence to the body.

Now we've forgotten that meaning of the word member.

Still, that's the way the Bible talks about membership. Paul tells us in First Corinthians:

“just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less

3 Sermon, January 21, 2012

respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." 1 Corinthians 12:12-26, NRSV.

The 1 Corinthians passage tells us that we need each other. But even more than that, we are *part of* each other. There is no real separation. *That's* what it means to be the body of Christ.

If I speak careless words to my brother or sister in Christ it doesn't hurt just me; it hurts others; it hurts the relationship. It injures the body.

In the Gospel of John we read the same thing, only told in a different way. It's an agricultural image – an image of a vine connected together, roots, trunk, branches, fruit, leaves. And Jesus is the trunk to which we are all connected. We are a part of Jesus.

Maybe that's what it means to be part – a member – of Christ's body. The life-sap of the spirit flows from Christ to us.

5. Practically – what is membership?

That's the theological part, the Biblical part.

Biblically, there's not much difference between being a member of the body and being a disciple of Jesus.

But practically, we've defined membership as a set of promises to stay connected, stay in relationship. The United Methodist Church has defined membership as something that comes out of our faith in Christ, our connection to the body, and our promise to live a Christian life. And that comes out in a promise to be loyal to the United Methodist Church in five ways:

- With our prayers
- With our presence
- With our gifts
- With our service and
- With our witness.

When a person becomes a member of a United Methodist Church, they promise loyalty in those ways:

4 Sermon, January 21, 2012

To pray for the church
To show up in worship
To give money
To find a way to be in ministry with time and talent
To speak about the truth of God's love and justice.

If you're not doing those things, you are not fulfilling your vows of membership. Some United Methodist Churches will try to define it in measurable ways, for instance: specifying a minimum number of times you need to be in worship, or that you must make a contribution of record to retain membership.

6. How does that differ from other memberships?

Membership, as I've said, is ideally about an inseparable connection to Christ and the church.

Yet we live in a world where we need to have things like church budgets and apportionments, which are partially based on membership. And so, we get into counting noses and thinking about membership in terms of measurable things like giving and attendance.

Ideally, all members would give proportionally, generously and attend frequently. But we know that's not the case.

So, what do we do?

Go the route of many organizations that have set dues, and if you don't pay your dues, you're not a member?

Do we mimic the rotary club, and tell people they must attend at least half the time if they want to remain members?

Do we ask people to renew their vows once a year, and if they refuse to renew their vows drop them from the list?

There are many things that would be beneficial about that kind of approach:

1. It would be much clearer who is a member and who is not.
2. It would set a higher standard.
3. It would encourage greater commitment

But if we were to use some of these tools to enforce membership, we would also lose something.

5 Sermon, January 21, 2012

We would lose the original sense of membership, where a member is a member because of an inseparable connection to Christ and the church.

We would be focusing on outward signs, rather than an inner spiritual journey, and the inner spiritual journey would get neglected. We would focus on money more than prayer, because prayer can't be measured so easily. We would focus on the institution, instead of the relationships.

If we were to focus on membership enforcement, it would force us to look inward, rather than outward in mission. It would make us think more in terms of law than grace.

We are on this journey together. We will continue to ask these questions of how we define our relationship to God and to others. I invite you to pray not only about your own membership and discipleship, but also to pray that we continue to deepen our sense about what it means to be the body of Christ together.

Amen.