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The National Presbyterian Church

## Spirituality? Yes. Church? NO.

Matthew 25:31-46; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Isaiah 2:1-5

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And many millions of people do exactly that. In fact, if we were to look for a motto or a mantra for Sunday morning for many people, especially younger people these days, it would be pretty similar to the little sign you sometimes see on a store window:

*'No shirt, No shoes, No service'* . . . Don't want to put on a shirt and tie. Don't want to get dressed up. Don't want to go to a service of worship!

And people are saying that in their droves, in their millions. Though there are regions of the world where the church is growing rapidly (Africa, Asia, South America), in our nation and the West in general there is no question: – there has been a massive decline in attendance at church and in church membership over the past 58 years or so. Indeed, it's been rather staggering.

Our own denomination, for example, if you go back to 1965, had 4.3 million members.

Today the Presbyterian Church (USA), the combination of the old northern and southern churches has less than two million members.

And our own congregation has seen a decline in the last dozen or so years, from a membership of 2,400 and an attendance of 1400 on a Sunday to 1800 members and six, seven or 800 on a Sunday. We're still healthy.

We're still strong compared with others. But take that kind of decline in a smaller congregation, and things really begin to go downhill.

And if we think that that's bad enough, then leave our shores and go across to the Emerald Isle and look at the church in Ireland, the Catholic Church, where, largely because of all the scandals that have taken place there, the statistics are just staggering.

- So you go back to the 1970's and find that 90% of the whole population of Ireland went to mass weekly. That has dropped now to 25% weekly; but go to Dublin and it's down to 2-3%.
- And then think about the number of priests going into the ministry in Ireland. The Irish used to provide priests for the Catholic Church across the world. Back in the 60's and the 70's, some 400 men were going into the priesthood every year. In 2011, there were six. *Six!* From 400 to *six!* This is precipitous. This is an incredible decline.

The decline is especially evident amongst the young, and while some of it certainly has to do with scandal and squabbling and weakness and failures and the inability of the Church to move with the times, the fact of the matter is this that something has been happening in our nation that is far bigger than the Church itself. Something is happening to our society as a whole. And we are in the middle of it. We are in the middle of a massive cultural shift; where the growth of individualism and the loss of community and the unwillingness to commit to or join any group or organization or institution (think of the massive growth of cohabitation as opposed to marriage, for example) is all around us, affecting all aspects of society, not only the church.

Go back to 1995 and you will find Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam arguing the case rather graphically in an essay called "Bowling Alone" (which became a book by the same name in 2000), in which he documented the decline from the 1960's to the 1990's of some 25 to 50% of committed involvement in voluntary organizations and in groups, some of which were completely voluntary and others more or less voluntary. A massive decline.

This is about women's clubs. This is about parent/teacher associations. This is about Boy Scout leadership. This is about churches. This is about unions.

He illustrated the point by looking up bowling. And he said that while more people were bowling than ever before (I don't know if you're among them, but the statistic in the 1990's was for me rather staggering that some 80 million people in our nation bowled at least once every year. Eighty million people. That's a huge percentage for this one activity), nevertheless, participation in bowling leagues was rapidly declining: 40% in 30 years.

People were willing to go out and bowl, but were not willing to join the group that would do it week after week. Attending but not belonging, not getting involved.

At exactly the same time (1994) Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow was writing this:

The social contract binding members together in many organizations these days asserts only the weakest of obligations.

And he gives a list. And this may be familiar to you, in terms of how our culture thinks.

1. Come, if you have time. [DR: Who has time?]
2. Talk if you feel like it.
3. Respect everyone's opinion.
4. Never criticize. [DR: These are not bad things]
5. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied. Just shrink away (since there was no tight bond in the first place) if you become dissatisfied.

These are the norms in our society around about us. And they affect all of our institutions, so that the willingness to stick together like a family, like a team, like a marriage, through good and bad, through thick and thin, *"for better for worse, for richer for poor, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish,"* it's fading in all kinds of ways in our society, and the effect of that decline can be seen not only in the Church but in all kinds of other ways and places in our society as well.

Indeed, it's part of the reason for our conversation last weekend in what we called 'Our Civility Conference'; the ability to be civil declines when we cannot enter into relationships in which we agree to stay with each other, to sort something out, to reach a reasonable conclusion. If you're always free to walk out, break apart and disappear, you'll never wrestle with people and issues in such a way that you'll get to a different point of view than the one with which you start to begin with.

And not only that, not only do we have this difficulty with being civil and entering into conversations which actually shape and change things, but it's hard enough even to connect in a meaningful way. Ross Douhat, in his book *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* <sup>1</sup> quotes a study by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith who looked first of all at teenagers and then at 20-somethings. And in his report on 20-somethings (called "Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults"), he writes this.

... the majority of those interviewed stated that nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people. Most of those interviewed said that it is nice if people help others, but that nobody has to. Taking care of other people in need is an individual's choice. If you want to do it, good. If not, that's up to you, even when pressed. *What about victims of natural disaster or political oppression? What about helpless people who are not responsible for their property or disabilities? What about famines and floods and tsunamis?* "No," they replied, "if someone wants to help, then good for them. But nobody has to."

These are staggering statements. We need to ask what has happened. How is it, that a majority of those interviewed, could say such things? What in the world is going on here?

Well, what I think is this, that for the first time in our history we have collectively forgotten the teaching of Jesus, which used to be well known not only among those who went to church but among those who didn't go to church. But it is being forgotten. It's not taught in our schools. It may be taught in our churches, but people aren't attending so people don't know, for example, for the first time in our history, the commandment that we are to "love our neighbor as ourselves." The foundational commandment not only to love God, but to love our neighbor as ourselves. They just don't know it. And for those who do know it, either they don't believe it or hold it to be authoritative. Nice idea, but not binding. The love commandment used to be part of our society's DNA, but it's no longer there.

And why is not a part of the DNA? Well, I believe that the answer is related to the loss of community and connection not only with those places where you are going to hear the commandment (commandment, not suggestion!), but, and this is perhaps even more important, the loss of the community within which the living out of that Commandment is learned.

How do you learn to love your neighbor as yourself? In communities that can disintegrate as soon as it gets uncomfortable? Of course not. But only in communities that are bound together by covenant within which we agree that we will stay together through thick and thin, through up and down with people we like and people we don't like, but to whom we are committed because God has given them to us as our neighbor, and we have been commanded to love them. And when there is no escape, we find a

way to do that. You learn to do these things in the rough and the tumble of life.

Do you know what a rock tumbler is? It's little can that goes round and round in circles. You put rough rocks in it. And you let it go round and round enough until all the rough edges are worn off and instead of this rough, ugly rock, out emerges some beautiful, polished gem. But it only happens if you stay in this tumbler. It's the only way it will happen. If you stay in there. The rocks may be screaming, "Let me out, let me out!" but the owner says

*"No! Stay in there because I want to make of you something beautiful, together. You can't do it by yourselves, but only with one another. Through thick and thin."*

And this is what the Church is about. It's not only the place where you learn in your head, but the place where you learn to grow, in community, with others. Through the good, the bad, the difficult, the ugly. Through it all.

For Jesus, the Church wasn't optional. When he came to this Earth he did not come just to teach us to be spiritual. He was not simply a spiritual guru. Yes: He comes to us one-on-one. He knows us by name, but as soon as he came, he called his disciples whom he knows by name as individuals, he called them to follow him together, as a community. This was his plan from the beginning.

The Church is not an added extra, as if someone said, "Now Jesus is gone we need to band together." No, no! This was in Jesus teaching from the beginning. Not only love, but the formation of a community as well. Right from the outset of his ministry.

Twelve Disciples. For example, at the very beginning of the gospels, he calls his disciples together. There are hundreds of them, but he chooses in particular, how many? He chooses twelve (12). And why twelve? Because twelve, as every faithful Jewish person listening to him would have known, is the number of the tribes of Israel. So he, from the beginning, set out to create not just good people, but a good powerful new community. This is his goal from day one. To create a new people of God who will live and serve God together. Not as an added extra.

- It's *not just Jesus and me* (I think I'll think about *them* when I want to!).
- But it's *Jesus and me and us.* From the very beginning.

This is implicit in the number twelve, But it's explicit elsewhere in Jesus' teaching.

**Build My Church.** Jesus makes it quite explicit for example in Matthew, Chapter 16, when Simon Peter, his closest disciple, finally realizes (the lights go on!) that Jesus is not just another rabbi, but he is the Messiah, the son of the living God. Jesus asked Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" And Peter says "You are the Christ, the son of the living God." And what does Jesus say after that? Well, let me read you some of the verses in Matthew 16:

*Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God. Jesus answered him, blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven and I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock" [DR: the rock of your faith, the rock of your declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God], "I will build my church." [DR: This is Jesus' intention, to build his church], and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it.*

So the Church is not our idea. It's not just a good idea which is useful when we want it to be useful. But if we want to be followers of Jesus, it's bedrock: it's HIS idea! It's right there in the heart of his teaching.

Which is *why Jesus feels quite free to command us to do not only those things we can do individually, but those things we can never do as individuals*, things that are simply impossible for us to do as individuals; and yet we are obligated to do them.

And this is the point of the passage of scripture that we read earlier in Matthew, Chapter 25. We are called as Jesus' followers, not just to be loving, not just to be kind (though we need to be loving and we need to be kind), but to love in a particular way... *by feeding the hungry; by giving drink to the thirsty; by clothing the naked; by welcoming strangers; by healing the sick and visiting those in prison.* This is what Jesus commands his followers to do. That is what he commands to you and me. It's not optional. It's not an added on extra. This is his command. *Feed the hungry. Give drink to the thirsty. Clothe the naked. Welcome strangers. Heal the sick. Visit those in prison. Not an option.*

**But can you do this?** Can *I* do all of this? I don't think so! At least not by myself. And even if I had the money to do it, I would employ other people to help me out. These are things that cannot be done by individuals alone. But they *can* be done when the whole team gets

together and makes it their mission. It *can* be done when we unite, when we come together and say “*this is Christ’s mission, this is my mission, this is our mission, together.*”

And indeed, when you read the text carefully, you see that this is exactly what Jesus is saying. Let me read a few of those versus together, from, again, from Matthew 25 and at Verse 37.

Jesus points to one group (He calls them “the Righteous” – it’s a group), and says

*“And the Righteous will answer him. ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food? Or thirsty and gave you something to drink and when was it that we, they answer as a group, saw you as stranger and welcomed you are naked and gave you clothing and when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you.’ And the King will answer them [DR: it’s all plural], truly I tell you [DR: and here’s where we have a real dilemma with English. The word “You” almost always in the Greek New Testament is “You plural,” So let me re-translate. Truly, I tell you all, just as you all did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you all did it to me.”*

He’s speaking to the group. And it’s a group that needs to respond together. There’s individual commitment here, but there’s also commitment to the group as to what we can do together.

From the very beginning, Jesus taught in a way that would let us know that what he wanted to leave behind was a team. Christianity was from the beginning a team sport. *Not like golf. Not like jogging. Not like swimming and not like bowling.* Which you can do with others, to be sure, but which you can also do alone. No, it’s *far more like football, or baseball, or basketball, or volleyball or even tennis*, where you need at least one person, just one other person, to do it with. All the others need two teams to play the game, but with tennis just two people total will do. But not one! You cannot play it not alone! You need somebody else. And Jesus gets that, which is why he makes his promise that “where two or three are gathered together, there he’ll be (Matt. 18:19): He’ll come to the game. He’ll be in the stands supporting you. He’ll be on the field with you. He would energize them. Indeed, he promises (as he meets with his follower at their last supper: “I will be the food that you eat, which will give you the energy to fulfill what I command you to do. I will empower you.”

And that really is his promise, as we gather round this Communion table here today: to be present with you and me individually, yes; but

more especially to be present with us together, in 'communion' and in communion to bind us, not only to God, but to one another, to bind us into a team, through which we can bear witness to God together in a way that we simply cannot do by ourselves.

The sad truth of the matter, of course, is that the Church is inadequate for its task. There is sin in our lives. In our congregation, we confess our sins Sunday by Sunday. We are far from perfect. There is hypocrisy in the Church.

[DR: You've heard the story about the person who said: 'I could never join the Church, it's filled with hypocrites?' To which the reply is: 'One more won't make any difference!']

Yes. Of course, we should be ashamed of some of the things the Church does. But the Church has been, and always will be, imperfect. There would be no Bible if the Church were perfect. Paul's letters in our New Testament were written to churches which were dysfunctional. That's why we have the Scripture. Because we're imperfect, on a journey, not yet at our destination. The community is imperfect, but Jesus says to the community, Jesus says to the team, Jesus says to you and me, his recruits,

*"I want you all on my team. I'm recruiting you. I've covered all the bases, I've sent out my scouts. I know exactly who you are. And despite your flaws, you are the ones that I want. Indeed, I paid the transfer fee to get you on my team. Through my life and my death and my resurrection, it's all been paid for. You're coming onboard. I invite you in. And I not only invite you in, but I will come into the midst of your community, your church, and I will give you everything you need in order to do my work in flesh and blood after I have gone. Will you join me?"*

The team, our creeds remind us, is called "The Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church!"

*"Will you join me?"* Jesus asks.

– What a privilege. What an honor. What an opportunity –

He says,

*"If you do, I'll take you from where you are to places you've never been, where you want to go. Where you will find eternal joy and rest. Come on. Let's play together for the glory of God!"*

1 *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics*. Ross Douthat. Free Press (April 17, 2012).