

“Confirmation – Not Just For Kids, Part 2: Why Church?”

Sermon Preached by David D. Colby

Central Presbyterian Church

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Scripture: Ephesians 2:19-22

I don't even know I'm going to say the words until they come out of my mouth, and when they do I feel slightly faint. Perhaps I was feeling faint already – it is Sunday morning, and I have not yet eaten, despite having left the flat a couple of hours ago. Perhaps if I'd had a bowl of cereal as soon as I got home, I would never have said anything.

“I'm going to church. Does anyone want to come?”

David and the children look at me with some interest, for some time. It's as if, having said something eccentric, I might follow this up by doing something eccentric, like stripping naked or running amok with a kitchen knife. I am suddenly glad that it is not my job to convince people that going to church is a perfectly healthy leisure activity.

So says Katie Carr, the main character in Nick Hornby's book How To Be Good.¹ Katie's husband presses her with questions.

“What church?” says David.

Good question.

“The one round the corner.” There must be one round the corner. They're like betting shops, churches, aren't they? There's always one round the corner, and you never notice them if you don't use them.

“What are you looking for?” David asks, relishing my discomfort.

Last week we began this sermon series, “Confirmation – Not Just for Kids.” Our topic last week was the primary question – who is God? Today's question is “Why Church?” For those of us who are here or in some church just about every week it may seem like an odd or unnecessary question. But not for most Americans. Roughly ninety-six percent of Americans routinely answer surveys and polls by saying that they believe in God.² But clearly, many of those God-believers are not regularly involved in the life of any church (or synagogue or mosque or Buddhist meditation center). For many Americans, like this British family in Nick Hornby's novel, the thought of waking up on Sunday and going to church is as crazy as stripping naked and running amok with a kitchen knife.

The topic this morning is church. I love how John Buchanan described church with pairs of seemingly opposite qualities: “this wonderful, sometimes exasperating, heroic, sometimes

cowardly, profound, sometimes trivial, holy, always very human institution.”³ Church. When I was in confirmation, my mom told me something I will never forget, “In the church you will see the best of people and the very worst of people.”

So how shall we approach church? Douglas John Hall is one of the brightest theologians of our time. And in a very readable book he titled, Why Christian: for those on the edge of faith, he writes,

When we think about the church, we should try to avoid being idealistic, romantic, utopian. The same thing would have to be said about any institution, really . . . But for some reason people expect churches to avoid all the problems that beset other institutions. It isn't so. Wherever there are imperfect people, there will be imperfect organizations; and wherever the imperfect people try to be honest and intimate (as churchfolk often *do* try) the imperfections of their community may be even more visible than elsewhere.

There is no such thing as a “perfect” church, and the people who go about looking for such an ideal are bound to be disappointed. The Christian gospel isn't about the perfect church, it's about the perfect love of God, which none of us deserves, and from which we all fall short.⁴

I think Hall is very helpful here – the perfect church will never be found here on earth. Just about every church described in the New Testament is a lesson in flaws and conflicts – too lukewarm in their faith, beset with factions, stingy in sharing. The churches in the Bible would not make a top ten list of ideal churches!

And let's make no mistake about this. You don't have to go to church to be good. As Saint Augustine put it, “Many whom God has, the church does not have, and many whom the church has God does not have.”⁵

But we, at least for today, are here. This is the day of our annual meeting, and we're thinking about church today. So, if you are not a member⁶ please bear with us because I want to speak more specifically now about Central.

It is often said that the church is just one generation away from extinction. The beliefs and questions and concerns of the church must be passed on from generation to generation. And each new age requires new ways of responding. The church is always just one generation away from extinction – but that was particularly so here at Central.

My predecessor John Severson pointed to an elephant that sat in this sanctuary alongside dwindling numbers of people - he pointed to the elephant in the room and posed this question, “Do you want to die with money in the bank?” It may have been the single best thing John did here. And Central answered – emphatically - no. So when I arrived here little over a year ago, my task was to help Central create a viable and faithful future. I didn't kid anyone then, and I won't now either. The situation at Central was dire – a membership decline from 1600 members in the early 1960s to 176 at the beginning of 2005. Central hadn't had a balanced budget in 20

years or more. At each Inquirer's class we have held since my arrival - every new member has heard me say - that we are in the midst of a four year designated pastorate - a trial period to answer this question: will we live, or should we die? To live into a viable future, we know that we need to grow in our identity as a 21st century church, we know we need to grow in people, and we need to grow in dollars. Will we live, or should we die? A stark choice, yet I think this is the most exciting thing I have ever been part of in my 35 years of participation in churches. Already we are having fun together and we are creating a church that is making a difference.

Today we will have our annual meeting. No fireworks are expected. We will receive reports from the various committees and organizations of the church. We will hear that 2005 was really a great year for Central, with strong growth in our sense of purpose and strong growth in people. There is a lot to celebrate about the year that has just passed. Things are going well, but we have a long way still to go.

There are still challenges ahead. It would be a huge mistake to believe that we are on the right track and then become complacent or fall back into old patterns. Consultants who study turn-around organizations know that when progress starts happening is exactly when you need to step on the gas and accelerate into the future with an even tighter focus on the chief goals and purpose.

The Session took a courageous decision in approving a budget for this year that will help us continue our growth - with funds dedicated to staffing for growth, with realistic budgets for building maintenance, with support for the proposed programs of our active committees, and with a generous budget to support mission and community service. This budget is ambitious, but has the clear goal of taking steps toward becoming a faithful, vibrant church.

There is just one problem. Our plans exceed our pledged commitments of dollars. Right now we are living off our collection of investment funds, what I loosely call our "endowment." This is nothing new. Treasurer Bill Zopfi tells me we haven't had a balanced budget in more than twenty years. Now I am a conservative person, financially speaking. I don't generally believe in spending the principle of investment funds. I don't even really believe in spending the income on investments other than for major capital projects. But in this case, I believe that the Session's budget is wise – we can not afford not to spend what it takes to continue to grow.

Remember John Severson's question to Central, "do you want to die with money in the bank?" At our presbytery meeting yesterday, a few people asked me what I was preaching on. I told them about this sermon series and I said I was also going to address this issue of balanced budgets, the use of endowments, and the future of Central. A couple people gulped and said that was bold of me, someone else, though, said that that was exactly why the presbytery thought I was supposed to be here.

Clearly this is not a long-term sustainable solution. As we grow in our mission and as we grow in people, we also need to grow in our generosity. If we are going to do everything I believe God is calling us to do and be from right here on this corner of Cedar and Exchange, we need to increase our revenues. Our 'endowment' is not large and is getting smaller.

I expect that we will cut our projected operating deficit significantly in the next nine months. I hope that you will join me in responding with a pledge of financial commitment for this year. Our weekly offerings and special gifts make so much possible right here. Great churches are active in their community doing amazing even heavenly work, and great churches are financially healthy. I believe we can do it. I believe God is counting on us to be a great church right now, right here. It takes prayer, it takes time, it takes hard-working volunteers and staff, and it will take a generous commitment of dollars, but I believe God needs us.

At the end of Moses' life, as the Hebrews stood on the verge of the Promised Land, Moses challenged the people with a final address.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors (Deuteronomy 30:15,19-20).

We face the same challenge today – choose life or death. Even in our anti-bureaucratic and anti-institutional climate we must admit the church is an institution. But this is about so much more than mere institutional survival. This is about the church being the church.

Why church? Anne Lamott puts it this way in writing why she makes her son Sam go to church.

I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds.

The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians – people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful. . . Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew [Presbyterian Church] tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of *home* – that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, "You come back now."⁷

Why church? Esther Holtz. Esther Holtz is Central. I won't say how old she is, but I want to have her energy when I am half her age. She is here in church rain or shine every Sunday. And on Wednesdays, she is a regular on Barb Westman's kitchen team – trying to stay on the leading edge of as many as 130 hungry eaters.

Why church? Christine and Loice Howard. Christine and Loice – our rambunctious 4 year old twins are Central. Cindy had taken the girls to other churches, but none felt quite right and so Cindy's colleague Chandy told her to try Central. And the first time they came to Central, the girls came running back to their mom, and said, "there are people here who look like us!"

Why church? Minnesota Public Radio's All Things Considered is Central. Their staff - Tom Crann, Jane Solinger, and Jeff Jones - eat here at Central almost every Wednesday. Hard-working colleagues who know they will be on air soon, they take time to eat together and laugh together and welcome other people to their lunch table.

Why church? Yang Thao is Central. A Hmong refugee who came to Minnesota in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, Yang is a regular at the FIRE English classes arriving early each time, who greets others with a smile. FIRE offered a Creative Writing class, helping immigrants improve their English skills and share their experiences. Yang wrote a poem for this class called Freedom Tree that compares a tree protecting his cousin's house here in Saint Paul with his inability to protect his people in his native land of Laos. Now this church is like a tree of freedom.

Why church? People will come to Central Tuesday night for a community forum on immigration, policy, and community. This is a safe and civil space that will bring together the mayor and the Mexican consul and immigrants and people of faith as well as state legislators who will be voting soon on proposed bills.

Why church? Central has people who come for a class on sacred aging on Wednesday morning, and youth stay after church for confirmation.

Why church? Imperfect though we may be, as faulty as any other group of humans, church helps us to ask the right questions, and find ourselves challenged and changed and loved by others. Why church? Because, as the letter to the Ephesians puts it,

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.

Next weekend, tell your friends to put down their kitchen knives and get some clothes on and come to Central.

Why church? Come for a visit, and you just might stay for the journey.

¹ (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001) 230.

² George Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century (Cook Communications, 2000) 177.

³ John Buchanan, “Church,” Sermon preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, 12 February 2006.
www.fourthchurch.org/021206sermon.html

⁴ Douglas John Hall, Why Christian: For Those on the edge of Faith (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1998) 122-123.

⁵ Cited by Hall, 125.

⁶ John Buchanan used a very similar sentence in the sermon cited above.

⁷ Anne Lamott, Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith (New York, Pantheon Books, 1999) 100.