

How to Make the Most Out of Church Membership

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2, 1999. Scripture Lessons: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A portrait in Washington, D.C. depicts George Washington, all decked out in his Masonic Freemasonry regalia, laying the cornerstone of the United States Capitol in 1793. I read somewhere this week that a search is underway to try to find the cornerstone. If you go to the Capitol Building you'll find on one side of the building a plaque which says, "Beneath this tablet is the original cornerstone for this building." Trouble is, excavators dug and discovered that the cornerstone isn't there. People always assumed the tablet was correct. The tablet was put there on the basis of older published reports of the cornerstone laying ceremony. But the reports were wrong. The cornerstone isn't where it's supposed to be. Nobody knows where the cornerstone is. Experts are looking for it with all kinds of fancy scientific equipment. They haven't found it yet. They expect to find it in the next couple years of digging and testing.

Today's epistle lesson says that we don't need to search for the "cornerstone" of our faith. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen from the dead, is the Cornerstone of the Christian faith. Without the Crucified and Risen Christ, there is no church. There may be a building, but no church. The church is the House of God and like a vast medieval cathedral you and I are living stones in God's House. And God says to us, "Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ."

strong Men or sense of community

How can we make the most of church membership? Let God use us. "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" Each of us has gifts, talents. If we don't let God use our gifts and talents for the building up of his church experience shows that you'll end up far away from God. Are you an artist? Are you a mechanic? Do you have musical talents? Do you enjoy gardening? Computers? Prayer? Encouragement? Teaching? Each one of us needs to ask ourselves: What gifts do I have? Will I let God use me to build up his church? We often discover our gifts through others, through corporate worship or through a small group or simply from standing around in the fellowship hall after a worship

service sipping coffee and talking. People notice our gifts. "You're really handy with a hammer". "You're a good writer". "I noticed how well you listened". "You enjoy meeting new people". "You have a beautiful point." "I didn't know you were so artistic." We need to discover our gifts and let God use them for the building up of his house. *Strengthen our sense of community*

We need to let God use us. If we don't let God use us, we'll lose contact with God. *Martin Luther King loved to tell this story. He didn't want to be a national civil rights leader. He had gone into the ministry mostly because his father was a pastor and he always did what Daddy King wanted him to do. Martin wanted a quiet life as a professor, possibly President of Morehouse College someday. But as a young pastor he was thrust into the forefront of the Montgomery bus boycott. He came home late one night, tired, frightened. The phone rang. An angry voice on the other end said, "We're gonna get you Nigger!" Martin Luther King stood in his kitchen, frozen in fear. He wanted to call Daddy King for reassurance and advice. But Daddy King wasn't there. Then he said it was like a voice. He heard God speak to him. "Martin, do what's right. Stand up for justice. Be my drum major for righteousness. I'll be with you." He knew God had chosen him. He knew how God wanted to use him. His life was forever changed. He let God use him to build up the House of God.*

Let God use you! Get involved! Some of you are already involved. Plowing the snow from the parking lot in the winter. Helping with Deacons food boxes. Ushering. Greeting people. Participating in a small group. Singing and playing in the choir. Worshipping every Sunday. Praying. Financial contributions. Telling others about Jesus.

Let God use you. What happens when we don't let God use us? We end up far away from God. *We lose sense of community* When a whole church refuses to let God use them, the church crumbles. Might as well shut the doors. **Fred Craddock, tells about a church he knew as a boy, way back in the thirties.** He remembered it as the status church, First Christian Church. Everybody who was anybody went to that church when Fred was a boy. Not just anybody could walk in there and join. You had to make good money. You had to wear fancy clothes. And, of course, you had to be white.

As you might guess, First Church did not receive many new members. Members simply grew older. As an adult, Fred heard that First Church had closed. Too few people of the "right type." Fred had the opportunity to go back to town not too many years ago. He discovered that old First Church was still standing. Only now it's a restaurant, a fish restaurant. He walked in the big gothic doors and where the pews used to be, tables. Instead of ushers, waiters. Instead of worshipers longing "for the pure, spiritual milk", diners eating and drinking. He looked down to the front of the church where the Communion Table use to be. A huge salad table where the Communion Table use to be. The place was filled with people. Red and Yellow, Black and White. Rich people, poor people, young people, old people. All crowding around the salad table. Everybody's welcome at the table now. But it's not the Table of the Lord. That's what happens when the church stops being the church. When members don't let God use them.

Let God use you! An old Methodist minister told me a story about how God used a crusty old stevedore. A stevedore is a dock worker. San Francisco. 1941. The Sunday after Pearl Harbor was bomb. People who had been far away from church crowded the sanctuaries all over America. And so this crusty old stevedore showed up in church. He was a big burley guy with tattoos. A labor union man. He used colorful language most Methodists weren't use to. After the sermon, the minister invited people to come forward for Holy Communion. Near the front of the sanctuary sat a Japanese couple. Christians. They came forward and knelt to receive communion. Anger filled the sanctuary. Anger directed against the Japanese couple. Nobody else in the sanctuary was going to get up and kneel beside that Japanese couple. Japs! Enemies! Finally, the big, tough stevedore stood up. He marched angrily down the aisle to the communion rail next to the Japanese couple. He turned to the worshippers and pointed angrily. "I was taught that at this Table there ain't no Japs. There ain't no Americans. At this Table we're all God's people." And with that he turned and knelt beside the Japanese couple to receive communion. Slowly, the rest of the congregation, embarrassed and ashamed, came forward to receive Communion. It took a stevedore willing to let God use him to remind that congregation. **"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people."**

Give of your best.

Let God use you. "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." An elderly carpenter told his boss he was ready to retire. His boss was sorry to see his good worker go and asked if he could build just one more house as a personal favor. The carpenter said, "Yes". But his heart wasn't in it. He resorted to shoddy workmanship and used inferior materials. When the carpenter finished his work and the builder came to inspect the house, the contractor handed the front-door key to the carpenter, "This is your house," he said, "my gift to you."

Let God use you. If you are a member of Christ's church give of your best to the master. Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow spiritually. Come to Christ. Let God use you. "Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house." Build wisely. Because "you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."