

## **“It’s Not About Membership in a Club”**

Ephesians 2.17-22; 4.1-6

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Baptism of the Lord

It’s the third Sunday after Christmas, and our ranks have thinned quite a bit from where they were a month ago. Some of our members have fled south for the winter; some have been really sick; some take a look outside on days like today and think, “Huh-uh. Not today!” There are always a number of family members from far away visiting over the holidays, which is always a test for me – can I remember everyone’s names, or at least, who’s related to whom?” And then there are those, whether in this congregation or any other, who show up around Christmastime and around Eastertime, and who we don’t see much the whole rest of the year. I want you to know that there was some pretty intense praying going on, before, during, and after the Christmas Eve services this year – praying for the hearts and souls of all those people who wandered through our doors that night, either for the first time or who show up just once in a blue moon, that God might move in their hearts so that what they experienced might be a vehicle through which they might come to a deeper, richer, fuller knowledge of God and intimacy with Jesus Christ.

There are different kinds of church involvement. I think it basically boils down to three main categories, and ideally people progress from the first to the second to the third over a period of time.

In the first category are the people who *go to church*. They come to worship, whether frequently or infrequently or somewhere in between, though they haven’t joined. This is where all of us start, whether as babies being carted around by our mom or dad, or as people who start coming of our own volition sometime later in life, as teenagers or young adults or even older adults. We all start here: *going to church*. Sometimes, we’ll attend church for an extended period of time before we feel ready to take the next step; I remember when I first started attending the church where Katharine grew up, it took me a couple years before I felt like that church was “home” and a community that I wanted to join. The timeline shouldn’t be forced; no one should ever feel pressured to join a church. We have to allow room for God to work in people’s hearts. Some of you have been coming to this church for an extended period of time – in some cases, many years! – and hopefully you know that, when you’re ready, we’ll be happy to receive you into full membership. I want you to feel invited, not pressured.

That leads to the second category, the people who are *members* of a church. You go through a

confirmation class or a new member class, you learn some things about our identity as Christians in general or as Presbyterians in particular, and you make a public profession of faith here in worship on a Sunday morning, naming Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. That's a significant moment in a person's life. You make vows, like you do when you get married – vows to serve Jesus Christ, vows to engage in the worship and ministry of the local congregation, vows to offer your time, your talents, your gifts, and your service. My fervent hope and prayer is that people take those vows seriously from day one; I'd far rather have somebody hang out on the "friends" list than join the church if they don't intend to take the vows seriously. Which means that, if one member of a couple is ready to join the church and make those vows but the other isn't, then one should join and the other shouldn't. This has to be a *personal* decision everyone makes in their hearts.

The difficulty comes in when people either forget their vows, or fail to remember their significance. Sometimes, over time, people get lax. People start thinking they only need to show up periodically, or that they don't really need to contribute in meaningful ways to the ongoing life of the church. To belong on the active membership roll of the church, you need to be faithful in your worship attendance, and you need to be involved in some way in the ongoing ministry of the church, unless you've got a significant health issue that hinders your ability to participate. If you ever reach a point when you really don't care about fulfilling your membership vows, and it's not because of a health reason or other major crisis in your life, then the appropriate thing to do is request to be moved to our "associate member" roll. Just tell us: "I don't want these responsibilities anymore." That would make things a lot easier for everybody!

This is where there are often some significant misunderstandings. Membership in the church is not like membership in a club. Members of the church have *obligations* and *responsibilities*. You can join a club – let's say you get a membership at the Y – and all you have to do is pay your dues, and you can show up as much or as little as you want. You want to work out at the Y three times a week? Go for it. You want to just be able to go for a swim a couple times a year? That's fine too. *There are no expectations*, no obligations, no requirements, no vows. You've paid for your membership, and what you do with it is up to you. That works fine for the Y, or for any of the other multitude of clubs out there with similar kind of memberships. *But membership in the church is not like that.* When you join the church, you make promises – public promises – *sacred vows!* – about your commitment, your involvement, your giving of your time, your giving of your treasures. You are making promises to us, to God, to Jesus Christ. *Your integrity is on the line here.* It's really important that people understand that. Church is not a club that you join, and then show up at however frequently or infrequently you feel inclined. Membership is not about you getting services that you pay for – membership is about *committing to ministry in the name of Jesus Christ.* When you become a *member*, you also become a *minister*, a servant, serving God in the name of Jesus Christ for the betterment of this whole community. So you can't just then say to God, "Sorry boss, I don't feel like showing up or doing anything to help out." That's not how this works! That's not expressing *faithfulness* to the vows you made to God.

Which brings me to an important point. If you're a *member* in the church, then it's important that you have a *job* to do. Every member ought to have *some kind of responsibility* in the life of this community of faith, whether it's singing in the choir or helping Sheren count the money or folding and

stuffing the newsletters every month or serving on a committee or as an Elder or Deacon or whatever. If you're dealing with a major health issue or undergoing some other kind of crisis we'll happily give you a "pass," but if you're sitting out there in the pews, pretty healthy and with a relatively stable life, and don't have a job to do in the life of the church, regardless of whether you're a "member" or not, by all means, *we could use your help!* Walt mentioned last week that he really needs some more people to help run the sound board, and he'll happily train you. We could use someone who can take the audio recordings of our services and burn them onto CDs for our homebound members, and – if we can get those CDs produced – then we could use some people who would deliver them to people's homes. Sheren tells me she could use some more people whom she can call at a moment's notice to help with tasks in the office when things get really busy. Lori tells me she could use some help with bulletin board decorating, data input, copying, organizing and sorting craft supplies, gathering items for lessons, writing cards, and more. Deb is always looking for more singers; Darlene is always looking for more bell choir members. What we want to be doing is matching people up based on their gifts and interests – not "filling slots" with people who would rather be doing something different. Come talk to any one of us and we'll see what we can do to get you hooked up with a meaningful ministry that's fulfilling for you and beneficial for the whole church community.

That's the second category: *church membership*. But there's a third category: *membership in the Church with a capital "C"*. There's a difference between being a member of a congregation and being a member of *The Church*. This last category is entirely *spiritual* in nature. The members of the Church universal are those people who bind themselves, body and soul, to Jesus Christ our Lord. This ought to overlap with the previous category, membership in a congregation, but unfortunately it is sometimes the case that someone is so devoted to the *congregation* that they forget that they're also supposed to be devoted to *Jesus*. In the final analysis, it's the devotion to *Jesus* that matters most. When you see yourself as a member of *Christ's Church*, you seek to deepen your relationship with God through Jesus Christ through prayer, study, and sharing faith with fellow Christians. You start to care about *inviting other people into a relationship with Jesus Christ*. That's different than *inviting people to church*. You're not inviting people to get involved in a human organization; you're inviting people to get involved in a *divine relationship*. A lot of church-going Christians never really make it to this third stage, with the result that a lot of time and energy is spent *trying to get people to join the congregation*, when really what's needed is time and energy spent *trying to help people build meaningful relationships with God through Jesus Christ*. That's called *evangelism*, and frankly it's something that most Presbyterians aren't very good at. At the end of the day, I don't really care if people are Presbyterian or Methodist or Lutheran or Baptist or just about *any* other kind of Christian. What I care about most is that people *know Jesus Christ* and desire to *follow him in their heart*.

So today, at the beginning of this new year, we come again to the water, the baptismal water where we took our first meaningful step in this journey of faith. We're not baptizing anybody today; we're simply using water symbolically to remind us of the promises God has made to us, and the promises we have made to God. Let it be a *reminder* to all of us about our commitment to Jesus Christ, and to the church of Jesus Christ.

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