

“WHAT I SAID I WOULD DO: I - ‘BE HERE’”

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(The Vows of UMC Membership)

Psalm 100

A couple of weeks ago, several of our brothers and sisters and Christ got up out of their seats in the pew and came forward to the chancel rail to formally become members of this church. In front of God and you, they took the vows of membership, and one of them was that they would be loyal to the United Methodist Church by their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service and their witness.

It’s the same thing you said when you joined the church (with the exception of the vow to witness, which was just recently added). But indeed, everyone who unites with a United Methodist Church family in membership stands before God and the church and promises to do those things - to pray, to be present, to give financially and in service, and to witness to their faith.

So, for the next five weeks or so, in this new sermon series we are going to look more closely at those things we said we would do. Today, we begin with the promise to be present - to be here.

It used to be that being here was a no-brainer - that’s just what you did. Look at attendance records from churches in the 1960's say, and you’ll see that the figures are generally much higher in most churches than they are today. Back then everybody went to church, and everybody went to church every Sunday. It’s just what you did.

Not so, these days. In a Barna study (Barna is a group that studies church attendance trends) it was noted that the number of unchurched adults, that is, people who have not attended a Christian church service in the past six months, has doubled - **doubled** - since 1991. (On-line, Pastor Dan’s Blog)

That’s astounding, in itself. Consider also, then, your own worship attendance. How regularly are you here? Some of you, of course, are here every Sunday, so I’m preaching to the choir. But others are not - and it’s because your life is pretty busy. Some Sundays find you in the air flying off to a business meeting, or at the beach at your summer place. Some people find themselves caregiving these

days, which keeps them away. There are as many reasons as there are people when it comes to not being here on Sunday - nonetheless, there are also a lot of people with no real reason for not being here, they're just not here.

My friend and mentor, Tom Short, who was the Senior Pastor with whom I worked at Aldersgate, used to say something very interesting to prospective new members during the new member orientation class. He would look at a person who had a child in school, and say, "Mary - Have you ever found yourself looking at your little boy on a Wednesday night saying, 'What do you think, Johnny, you want to go to school tomorrow?'" "No," he would say. "You'd never say that, would you? Well," he continued, "then, never find yourself asking him on Saturday night 'think we should go to church tomorrow?'"

I'll never forget the first time I heard Tom say that. It had a profound impact on me and the others who heard it. It's all about what is important in our lives. It's all about priorities. It's all about commitment. At the very least, isn't coming to worship God as important as going to school?

You are saying yes to that simply by being here this morning. You said you would be here and you are here, not because we're taking attendance, and not because you feel you have to, but because you want to be here. You want to be present.

So why is being present in the church so important that we make it a vow of membership? Well, let's look together at a few of the reasons.

First, it's what God wants us to do. Did you hear the command given us in the scripture lesson this morning? "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, serve the Lord with gladness, come into His presence with singing." Being here is what God wants us to do - first of all, to offer Him thanks and praise. That's the main reason we come - to praise God for all things, and to thank Him for His love. That's the main reason we come.

But we also come to hear and learn. We come to encounter the Word, and absorb it into our hearts and lives. We come to listen to the Word said and sung and preached upon - we come to wrestle with it, and figure out what it means for our lives. One preacher put it this way: "If you do not faithfully attend church to hear God's message on a consistent basis it is highly unlikely that you will practice the principles of Christianity in your daily life. Hearing and doing God's word are intricately linked together." So we come to hear and learn.

Thirdly, we come to be strengthened. A writer named Tom Ross once said, "How refreshing it is to be able to cease from the rat race of the daily grind to

worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness in the presence of His saints. After dealing with the world all week, public worship serves to revive our spirits and encourage our hearts.” (On-line, Tom Ross, “Why Go to Church?”) I couldn’t have said it better myself! I can’t count the number of people who have told me that, next to praising and thanking God, that’s the main reason they come to worship - to receive strength for the week ahead.

A fourth reason, actually, a benefit of coming to church is being part of a supportive community. It’s a place where you are known, and your gifts are celebrated and used for the whole body. It’s a place where people care and share and love and support you, not only in good times, but especially in times of struggle. It is such a joy for me to sit up here and see the relationships that exist around this room - strong, supportive relationships - that have their roots in a common love for Christ.

Finally, a fifth reason to be here is to let others know where your heart is. Make know mistake about it - people know where you are on Sunday mornings - they notice. You’re saying by your presence that God is a vital part of your life, and you are committed to Him by being here. When you pull out of your driveway, your neighbor who is mowing his/her grass, knows where you’re going. When you tell your child’s coach you’ll get to practice after you first go to church, you’re witnessing to your commitment to God. When you get up and come to worship even though it’s the only day you could sleep in, you tell others who use that reason that there’s something worth getting up for and His name is Jesus Christ!

There are so many reasons - many more than I’ve listed this morning - why we say we will be here, why we are present, but there’s only so much time, and we’ve made a good start. But if you ever find yourself, like Tom Short said, on a Saturday night thinking about whether or not you’ll come to church the next morning, think on this little image -

Think of a campfire filled with burning coals, burning brightly. Now, if you remove one of those burning coals from that fire, and lay it aside, it will still burn. In fact, it will burn until the elements surrounding it overwhelm it and finally extinguish it. It will just burn out - the light will fade away.

So too with each of us and the church. How easily our passion for the Lord will fade if we remove ourselves from the fire that is the church. How easily the world will extinguish the flame if we are not here.

So today, let us celebrate the fact that we are here. And as we come to this table to celebrate the gift of God in Jesus Christ with all Christians around the world this day, let us recommit ourselves to keep coming until that day when we

gather for worship in the kingdom of heaven. May it be so.

Amen.