

"Worth Defending"

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Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Once upon a time I was visiting a church on a Sunday morning while on vacation. I've been a pastor for 29 years now, so I'm pretty much in the habit of going to church on Sunday mornings. Sunday morning is God's time, and I enjoy worship, and seeing what other churches do in worship. When I was younger I would often critique every part of the service and especially the pastor leading it. But now I'm more gracious, and I realize that it's hard to talk that much over an hour's time without something coming out wrong.

On this particular day I had to leave the service early because of travel plans. I snuck out the back and went downstairs through the fellowship hall. There was a woman in the hall. I recognized her from the choir. She

must of snuck out early, too. I looked at her and nodded hello. She looked me straight in the eye and said, *"That's it. I quit. I'm done."* *"Done with what?"* I asked her. *"Everything. Church. Choir. Boards. Committees. Greeting time. Coffee hour. I'm done with it all."*

I was reminded instantly about the fact that the church is simultaneously a divine institution and an all too human institution. Church can bless your soul like few other things can. And church can break your heart. I suspect that's part of the deal - that anything that has the power to bless your heart can also break it.

In church the highs are high, and the lows are often pretty low. I went grocery shopping this week. It was an emotionally stable experience - no real highs, no real lows, although I was pleased that the Pop-Tarts were on sale. That's the way it is with grocery shopping . . . but church is different. Church tugs at the heart and often rips it right open. Church challenges me, blesses me, stretches me, frustrates me, accepts me, overwhelms me - many times all on the same day!

Church can be like a roller coaster ride - it takes a while to get to the top and sometimes you don't get to enjoy the view for very long, because suddenly the bottom falls out and your holding on for dear life! Like a roller coaster ride, church has highs and lows, twists and turns, and they often come unexpectedly.

Church is also about relationships, and relationships are tricky and fraught with peril. There was a member at my first church who was a psychologist, and his favorite phrase was, *"That's relationships, Man."* When there'd be misunderstandings, hurt feelings, fights, whatever, he'd just shrug his shoulders and say, *"Relationships. It's just relationships."*

You know, people are a lot like porcupines - the closer you get to them the more dangerous it becomes. And we get close to one another when we do church together.

In Acts 2 you truly see the relational nature of Christianity.

"They devoted themselves to fellowship. All who believed were together and had all things in common. They spent much time together in the temple. They continued to meet in peoples' homes, breaking bread together, praising God together, day by day."

Christianity is a religion of community. *"It's relationships, Man."* And that's where it gets tricky. So, all these kinds of thoughts are running through my mind, as she's telling me she's done with church. I said, *"You know, a lot of good things happen in church. What happened?"*

"Hypocrites, the people in this church are just a bunch of hypocrites," she replied. I'd heard that one before. We all have. I have a standard answer for that, but I held my tongue. My standard answer is, Yes, there are hypocrites in the church, but there are also sick people in the hospital and there's overweight people at the health clubs. But hospitals don't exist to make people sick and health clubs don't exist to make people fat. Both places like the church exist to help us be more healthy.

I also think the church doesn't have a monopoly on hypocrisy. They recall any product that causes cancer in laboratory rats and still sell cigarettes that kill over 400,000 people each year. We're all told to recycle and yet we let businesses get away without recycling. Think of the trash the fast food industry produces and how much of it could be recycled.

So the church doesn't have a corner on the market when it comes to hypocrisy. *"They're all a bunch of hypocrites," she said. "All they care about is themselves. They don't care about anyone else."* Some people outside of the church do have that opinion - that all we care about is perpetuating our institution, that all we care about is what goes on inside these walls. Of course that's not true, but it is an impression that's out there. That's why churches today are reclaiming the fact that mission and outreach are at the heart of why we exist.

The new hymn says, *"As a fire is meant for burning, with a bright and warming flame; so the church is meant for mission, giving glory to God's Name."*

And it's been that way from the start. Acts 2 it says, *"They would sell their possessions and give to anyone who had need."* A few chapters later they appointed the first Deacons of the Christian church and gave them the task of feeding the poor, who had flocked to the earliest Christians because they saw in them the compassion of God. *"They gave to anyone who had need."* And ever since then Christ-followers have been seeking to meet whatever needs they saw . . .

- starting hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes
- things like Habitat for Humanity and the Heifer Project
- "Communities Together" and the wonderful work they do in Lawrence
- places like Bread & Roses and Cor Unum, feeding people in need right here in our area.
- our spiritual ancestors believed in promoting education and literacy and even started a couple of schools you might have heard of - Harvard and Yale.
- Churches played a large role in the abolitionist movement and the Civil Rights movement.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church once said:

*Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.*

In many ways that describes the Christian Church. We're far from perfect

but we have a legacy of service and it's a living legacy that we continue today.

So, I said to her, *"Churches do a lot of good in the world. I'll bet this church does some good outreach. I'll bet they support some wonderful ministries and even get personally involved in these ministries."* She said, *"Yes, they do some good things, and they're pretty proud of it, too, but do they care about me?"*

That's what it all comes down to, doesn't it? Does the church care about me? If people can't see that and feel that, they'll never feel a part of the community and they won't experience God's love here.

I said, *"Of course they care about you. This seems like a very warm and friendly place. You heard the prayer requests, how much people care for other. I felt the warmth of the congregation when we greeted one another. I felt God's presence as we sang together and prayed together. God is in this place. Of course they care about you."*

"Can you give me a name?" she replied. *"Can you give me a name?"*

May I give her yours?