

Ten Questions Series  
What Do We Do About the Church? May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010

Some of us were at a workshop several weeks ago that featured a presenter from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. The forum researches the state of religion in America, and around the world. And he said his job isn't to particularly endorse any religion, or to make suggestions, but to offer data that shows what the religious landscape looks like.

The figure that jumped out at me when talking about people's religious affiliations was a change that is occurring in the category called "unaffiliated." It's a big category that includes people who once were connected to a church, and drifted away. It includes people who never belonged to a church. It includes atheists and agnostics. The national rate for Americans who are unaffiliated is 16%.

The people I meet most often in life in this unaffiliated category are "believers but not believers." They believe in God, they pray at times, they just don't feel like they need to be a part of a religious institution. They don't feel like the church connects with their life, or they got hurt in a church somewhere, so they've never been back, or they say the church is full of hypocrites.

Do you know what the percent of unaffiliated people is in Oregon, people who aren't connected to any church? It's 30%, almost one out of three Oregonians. These are people in your families, your neighbors, people you work with. And when you share with them what's going on at your church, they say, Oh, I believe in God. I just don't feel like I need to belong to a church. I can worship out in nature, or out on the golf course.

So outside the church we have lots of folks who look at us and say, You haven't given me a good enough reason to be a part of your club. And then within the church, we have folks who have become frustrated with one form of church, and have switched to another. So you have people raised with liturgy who have joined Pentecostal churches; you have Pentecostals who get tired of emotionalism and become Presbyterians, and Presbyterians who get tired of rationalism and become Orthodox, and people who leave political churches because they want a more personal form of the faith, and people who leave personal faith churches because they want a church that'll take a stand in the world. Over half of Americans have switched religious traditions at some time in their life. Who here this morning is in a different denomination than the one you were raised in?

One of the models that we inherited out of the Roman Empire is the Constantinian model, that a church consists of a building that has a professional leader called a pastor, and the church members hire the pastor and pay him or her money to take care of their religious needs.

And there is some truth to that. I have been called to shepherd this flock. I've been trained to be a pastor. One of my jobs is to help you grow in Christ. But the New Testament model isn't centered around the pastor and the building, it's centered around

the people of God doing ministry in the world. The church began on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit landed on a group of followers of Jesus and empowered them to share the good news of Jesus with the world in word and deed.

And for the first three centuries, the people of God, the church, met in homes and other places because they were a minority in a larger world of the Roman Empire. But when the emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity in 312, Christianity became the official religion of the empire. Everybody in the village got baptized. Church buildings began to go up in the village square. The church began to get a lot more structured and hierarchical. And then the Reformation came along, and we disagreed not only on theology, but on church structure. Luther said we didn't need the pope. Some churches said you didn't need structure at all, just individual churches on the corner that didn't have to answer to anyone. And when you have a disagreement with the pastor, you split off and form a new church. I grew up in a church tradition like that.

But in an era when many people say they don't want to be a part of the church, they don't want to be a part of an institution; we need to ask the question, What is the church about? What do we exist for? And Brian McLaren gives a very simple answer in his book that is also embarrassingly hard to do. He says, What if the church exists to form Christ-like people, people who love and live and serve like Jesus?

What if the church exists to save people from wasting their lives? I was at a workshop where the presenter asked the question, Why aren't we more concerned about people who are dying without Christ? And I thought to myself, Why are we also not more concerned about people who are *living* without Christ? People who are less than they could be? People who are gaining the world but losing their souls?

So when we ask the question, What about the church? the question has to do with what our core mission is. Are we forming a community of Christ-like people who embody and communicate in word and deed the kingdom of God that we know in Jesus? And we don't form that community just for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.

St. Irenaeus of Lyons once said that a human being fully alive gives God glory. How do we as the church help those in our community become fully alive, become who God made them to be? There are desperate people around us who aren't looking to the church for answers. Many of them look at the churches of Jesus Christ and see all the problems. They see the divisions, the straddling of fences, the sexual controversies, problems with pride, excesses in some forms of spirituality and deficits in others.

And maybe instead of feeling guilty about that, we need to say to ourselves that makes us authentic New Testament churches, because the first Christian churches had all of those problems.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is a great example of a New Testament church with problems. And you can hear somebody from Corinth saying, I wouldn't belong to that church. Look at the troubles they have! The members had divided themselves into

personality cults. Some said I'm following Paul, some said, I'm following Apollos, some said Peter, some simply said, I belong to Christ. Many of them were not maturing into Christ-like people, because they had competing factions based on who had the most knowledge of godly things. They were tolerating gross immorality; they were suing each other in court. They had disorderly worship; they disagreed with each other over which spiritual gifts were more important.

But the biggest issue seemed to be over whether or not it was appropriate to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, but now was being sold in the public market. Some of them claimed to be wiser by saying, We know that these other gods don't exist, so it doesn't really matter that this meat was sacrificed to an idol. And others thought it was blasphemous. And both groups within this church looked down on the other.

So Paul says, You are all caught up in how much knowledge and wisdom you have, and yet you are tearing each other apart. Paul says, actually, knowledge and wisdom are gifts of the Holy Spirit, and they are not given for your personal advantage, but for the common good.

And then Paul uses the image of the human body, that all the parts need to be working together for the common good of the whole body. We in the body of Christ belong to each other and we need each other, especially in our diversity! And this community of the church actually becomes the body of Christ in the world.

So how does Paul say that this Corinthian church can move beyond their divisions and competitiveness to be the body of Christ in the world? Paul says it's the way of love. That's why I had us hear chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians this morning. Paul says it doesn't matter if you speak in heavenly tongues, or if you can understand all kinds of mysteries, or if you have great faith, or if you give away everything you have: if you don't have love, it isn't worth anything.

If the people around us don't see love in us, it's all for nothing. And to the Corinthian church that felt so strongly about having the right knowledge, Paul says, love is the truest form of knowledge. Paul says love for each other can hold you together. Love can help you disagree and remain in community. Paul concludes the letter with this blessing: "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." (1 Cor. 16:13-14)

Let all that you do be done in love...So what is the purpose of the church? If the purpose of the church is to form Christ-like people, people who love and live and serve like Jesus, then the church can be a school of love! It's a community where we practice love! We don't just learn about it, we do it, we practice it, we live it, we model it, we put it on, we act it out.

We have started a Mutual Ministry Team again here at Prince of Life. The Mutual Ministry Team exists to help with communication and conflict resolution in the life of the church. But it starts with people going to each other. And because we are a typical

church, we have disagreements with each other; we have expectations that don't get met. We have conflict! That's normal! But if we are a school of love, where we are modeling for each other Christ-like behavior, then we go to each other in love and say, Let me share how I'm feeling! Were you aware that when you said that, I took offense? I felt trespassed against? Please give me your side of the story. I want to work this out. I want to speak the truth in love, and work through this. (Eph.4:15)

We have three eighth graders this morning who are saying, I believe! I believe what God did for me in my baptism. I believe that in the waters of baptism, God forgave me and made me a child of God. And these eighth graders can tell you stories from the Bible and can tell you that it's God's grace and not our works that bring us into a relationship with God.

But just as important as knowing the stories and the theology is that they are being formed spiritually in this community! They are discovering that living in community means forgiving each other, and working through problems, and putting up with people who bug us, because we're in the same community, and we need each other! What's the church all about? It's a space to help us all grow in Christ-like love! And we are taking that love out to transform the world, and help people become the human beings God created them to be!

Maybe you saw the story of the 90-year-old man who took a trip to Eastern Oregon this week in his 2002 Acura. Milton Pearlman was driving along the John Day River on US 26 when for some reason he hit the shoulder along a narrow stretch and his car ended up in the river. Oregon State Police Trooper Marv Ritter heard the call come in from dispatch. When he got there, he saw the car with the man in it, ran upriver several hundred feet, tied a rope around his waist, put on a life jacket, and jumped in the river. By the time he got to the car, he found Mr. Pearlman conscious and lucid, even though he'd been in the frigid cold waist-deep water for half an hour. By then a fire truck had arrived, and a crowd of people had gathered on the shore. The trooper got rid of the rope that he'd tied around him, and grabbed a rope that had been anchored to the truck and thrown out to the car. He wrapped it around Mr. Pearlman, gave him a life jacket, and then they began working their way to shore. At one point they went under water. But those on shore were encouraging them all the way. Let me quote from the newspaper: "Ritter (the Oregon state trooper) took heart when he looked to shore and saw several groups of people in the water, waiting to help. 'It was wonderful,' he said, 'As long as I live, I will see those people lined up, ready to help.'"

I don't think that's a bad picture of the church. There are people all around us who need to be rescued, falling short of who they could be, made in God's image. And we are lined up, offering words and deeds of encouragement, ready to help people become all that God wants them to be. We've got good news about forgiveness and hope and a new way to live. I'd like to think we are the encouraging people on the shore, pulling people out into a new way of life.

By the way, we keep falling back into the water too. We need God's grace in and through the community to keep pulling us out as well. What's the purpose of the church? To form people of Christ-like love to love and serve the world. Amen.