

## The Vows of Church Membership: 2. Presence

Hebrews 10.19-25  
Mason United Methodist Church  
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The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher went out one day to buy a horse in the mid-1800s. He found one he particularly liked and asked the stable owner what to expect from this horse. “Oh now, that’s a fine one,” the stable owner replied. “It’s gentle and quiet. It will do anything you ask it to do. It won’t kick or bite. It stands calm and still without needing to be constantly watched and tethered, and only requires basic care.” Beecher rubbed the horse affectionately. “What a horse!” he said. “If only it were a member of my congregation.”

What if horses really were members of our churches? Talk about having a *stable* church! There could be advantages. Covered dinners would be no big hassle by including lots of hay, apples, fresh carrots, sugar cubes and water! The word “Calvary” could be accompanied by the word “cavalry” with a veritable *stampede* for membership.

Acts 2.42-47 records a lightning summary of the wonderful characteristics of the early church. “[*The church*] devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” William Barclay characterizes this Acts 2 description in this way. It was a *learning* church. It was a church of *fellowship*. It was a *praying* church. It was a *reverent* church. It was a church *where things happened*. It was a *sharing* church. It was a *worshiping* church. It was a *happy* church. It was a church of *people whom others could not help liking*. Wow! What would it be like to

be part of a church like that? Know what? I am. We may not be perfect; but everything has been in place as we continue to *become* the church God wants us to be.

A fellow and his friend were talking about church when one said, “As soon as I find the perfect church, I’ll join it.” His friend said, “Well, there are three reasons why that will never happen. First, a perfect church will never accept you or me. Second, you and I wouldn’t feel comfortable in a perfect church. And third, as soon as you and I joined it, it would no longer be perfect.”

The stewardship of your presence strengthens *others*.

That very subject is the thrust of this second of five sermons on The Vows of Church Membership. The focus of this series comes from the covenant made when a person joins the United Methodist Church. The covenant question is found on page 48 of our hymnal and reads: “Will you...uphold [the church] by your *prayers*, your *presence*, your *gifts*, your *service*, and [as of the 2008 General Conference] your *witness*?” The focus for these five weeks will be on *The Vows of Church Membership: Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service and Witness*.

*Presence* goes deeper than *attendance*. The passage referenced in Acts 2 uses the term “together” three times within five verses to describe the atmosphere in the first church. Worship is done *together*. Many times a word spoken by another in praise, support, thanks, appreciation or cheer has kept another person on their feet.

Bruce Larson, formerly pastor of Seattle's University Presbyterian Church, talks about one aspect of our *togetherness* as Christians. In his book Ask Me to Dance Bruce speaks about the *ministry of presence* with another person. Specifically he writes about the rare art of *listening* as being when someone "took time to draw you out and ask you questions and listen intently." What a healing gift. And how rare. Just being *present*. Being *there*. Being *engaged, listening, and genuinely caring*.

A few years ago the Church Council adopted the final draft of a mission statement for Mason Church: "To discover, build and express Christian faith." We do that as a *community*. Together. We have an interest in each other. We also have an interest in the wider community of faith, including all denominations and faith groups. In the mission of discovering, building and expressing Christian faith we need each other. That's why the passage in Hebrews 10.25 encourages us to *assemble ourselves together* in worship.

The stewardship of presence strengthens *you*.

There are many who say, "I don't need the church in order to be a Christian. I can worship God on my own." But do they? Moffatt described the person attempting to be a Christian in isolation a *pious particle*. It is through the corporate worship experience that we exercise our Christian privilege and duty of *encouraging one another*. In the paraphrased words of John Wesley, we should strive to "get all you can in order to give all you can, to do all the good you can, to all the people you can, in all the ways that you can." Unfortunately, in our current economy, and amidst more self-centered social

norms, Wesley's historic three-point phrase might sound more like this: "Get all you can, can all you get, and sit on the lid."

The latter unfortunately typifies the self-centered "me" culture preference of some persons. The "I don't need anybody" mindset has crept into the lifestyle of many persons' separation of church and *fate*. "I don't believe in organized religion" is a familiar phrase for many who would rather do anything other than spend time in church on a promising weekend. Do those same folks believe in organized medical care? Organized education? Organized traffic? Organized banks? Organized systems for paychecks?

What could or should the *stewardship of presence* mean for us, or what would it look like, if we responded not from a sense of *obligation* – but a deep and longing *desire* to participate fully in the Body of Christ, the church, participating in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven? It would mean that I am accepting and accepted, just as I am, just as God accepts me. I could love and be loved. I could affirm and be affirmed. I could be accountable and receive accountability from another. It would mean that theological divisions and preferences would not be as important as hearing another person's story of their Christian faith journey with all of its ups and downs...celebrating together the wonderful love and care with which God made us as individuals, desiring to love us beyond our wildest imaginations. As Frederick Buechner said it, "That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that claim made for us that is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still." [The Sacred Romance, Curtis and Eldredge, p. 46]

I want to be in a community of faith like that. I want to be in a church like that. And I am. I am a part of it. Please don't let me be on the outside just because I am assigned as one of the pastors. We are not the only church, faith group or denomination in town; but we are here. And we are still here...by the grace of God. We need one another. We have an eternal interest in one another. We can transcend the difficulties in order to participate in God's ultimate desire for us...the *Sacred Romance* [the title of a book by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge, Thos. Nelson Publishers, 1997].

Maxine Hancock, an author and professor at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, is referenced in Ann Kroeker's book, The Contemplative Mom [pp 143-144]. Hancock lived in "a small town in Alberta, Canada, where there was one church in town. One. No chance for church hopping there. Like it or not, that was her family's church. If she had a falling out with someone, she couldn't walk away. She had no choice but to stay and work it out.

[Hancock is paraphrased in Kroeker's book as saying], "We're like rocks in a rock polisher. A rock goes into the rock polisher all rocklike...and not particularly attractive. Then all the other rocks start knocking against it, hitting it, chipping off pieces here and there. It's hard to believe all that jostling is doing any good. But after a long process – weeks or even months later – you open up the rock polisher, reach in, and pull out a spectacular, gleaming stone!

[Her point?] “Invest yourself in one group of people, one church...and see what impact you can have on one another over the years, as Christ moves in and through you to polish you into glorious creations conformed to Christ.

“Glorious creations conformed to Christ! Can we do that for each other? Can even our mistakes be used to polish others? How about in good ways? Can we influence people so powerfully through love that we are a part of their maturity process?

“Not only can we, we must. We are to be, in the church and in each other’s lives, exercising such extraordinary love and commitment to each other that people who aren’t believers will exclaim, ‘Look at the way they love! You don’t see that every day! They must be disciples of Jesus Christ.’”

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;  
I can feel his mighty power and his grace.  
I can hear the brush of angel’s wings,  
I see glory on each face;  
Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.  
UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL No. 328

This is holy ground. We’re sanding on holy ground,  
For the Lord is here, and where he is, is holy.

We are standing on holy ground,  
And I know that there are angels all around;  
Let us praise Jesus now;  
We are standing in his presence on holy ground.  
THE FAITH WE SING No. 2272

Amen.