

“The Privileges of Membership”

Text: Micah 6: 8; Matthew 11: 28-30; Luke 11: 9-12

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September 20, 2009

A colleague of mine was leading a meeting for folks who wanted to become members of the congregation that he serves. As is usual with such gatherings there was a time for lots of conversation back and forth. In the midst of it a question popped up that left him speechless. A bright forty-something man asked: “If I decide to join what are the privileges of membership?”

My friend’s mind went completely blank. He didn’t know what to say or how to respond. The very word *privilege* repelled him because he understands the church in terms of service rendered to others and not of privileges provided for members. He is more akin to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s timeless phrase, “the cost of discipleship” which is far a field from the privileges of belonging. And so he found himself dumb-founded. Eventually he stumbled out an answer, but to his chagrin neither he nor the man who had asked found it very satisfactory.

This all came to me as my friend sat with a few other minister-types over breakfast. As he told us about it he asked, “What do you say to that kind of question?” We bantered it back and forth for a little while. But as I left the question stuck with me, such that I bring it before you this morning. Because I am of a mind that we are, in fact, incredibly privileged as members of Christ’s church. I simply want to count a few of those privileges with you today.

I

Let me start with this. **Belonging to a church increases the probability that you will live a happier and healthier life.** At face value that may seem an odd, even selfish, reason to want to be a part of a congregation! But it’s true and it’s measurable!

The Wall Street Journal recently reported on a study done at the University of Chicago. It engaged a team of doctors who reviewed all of the data to date on the relationship of faith to health. They concluded unequivocally that those attending church enjoy better rates of health and lower rates of illness. They suffer less from depression. They reflect higher in measures of happiness and lower in mortality risk. This was stunning to Dr. Lynda Powell, one of the reviewers. She began the project as a hard-core skeptic but ended up saying, “After seeing all of this evidence, I think I should start going to church.”¹

So you see, people who develop and keep steady in the habit of participation in a church, or a mosque, or a synagogue share in this measurable benefit. It’s something like leaven in the loaf that works secretly and silently as Jesus signaled. But here’s the thing. Saying you belong is only a first step. You’ve got to show up, contribute, participate, support, give back - or it becomes merely self-focused and that defeats the benefit pretty quickly.

II

A second privilege. **Belonging to a church invites you into a community that is active in making the world a better place.** We are surely not perfect at this – no human institution can ever be. But over the long haul the church has been a remarkably positive agent in empowering

and transforming the broken places in the world. And our church, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, has long been on the cutting edge of so many important changes that the world needed and still needs.

Another study, this one out of Harvard just this past spring, found that members of congregations make better citizens. The correlation is this simple. Being active in and committed to a religious community puts an individual in a context which most often engenders an increased concern for others and provides an avenue for action. Listen to this: “The study found that religious Americans are three to four times more likely to be involved in their communities than non-religious Americans. They are more apt to work on community projects, belong to volunteer associations, attend public meetings, vote in local elections, attend protest demonstrations and political rallies and donate time and money to causes – including secular ones.”²

Gandhi once said, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” And Jesus brings it home, “By their fruits you shall know them.” But here’s the thing again. To fully garner this privilege takes more than showing up. It takes giving of yourself, and engaging with others who do the same, and offering your best, and finding ways to seek together the strength in community that we couldn’t quite pull off all on our own.

III

Another privilege. **Belonging to a church provides a place to recharge, refocus, and reconcile our lives to the Gospel of love.** Let’s be honest. None of us can be on the front lines of life very long, whatever shape our lives take, without losing some perspective – or having it skewed by any number of distractions. So we all need a place, an address, a community to help us to remember who we are, where we have come from, and to whom we belong.

When I was a kid and out in the car with my father, he would often engage me in a kind of hunt. He would say, “Keep your eyes peeled for the Flying Red Horse.” That was his way of saying that he needed to stop for gas - the Red Horse being the logo for Mobil stations. I would eagerly watch. And I came to learn from the fun of that hunting that every now and then we needed a place to stop at to fill our tank again. The lesson still holds. And whether the tank is mine or yours, not any one of us can find our fill all by ourselves. Especially in matters of the spirit.

But here’s the thing coming around again. In order for the full privilege of this we have to come! Attentiveness to our deepest needs of heart and soul require time and investment. Jesus said, “Come to me and take your rest for your souls.” Notice the verb come! And Luke tells us that those of the early church “came with glad and generous hearts.” Notice the verb came!

IV

One more for today. **Belonging to a church offers a context to immerse ourselves again in the overarching mystery of God.** It gives us a setting to sort out and seek answers to the large questions of life. It pours a foundation of faith beneath us on which to base and build our living – all shaped around the benevolence and goodness, the love and grace and glory of our Maker.

One of you sent me an e-mail this summer of some funny church signs found along life’s way. One such message on a church sign in Illinois said, “There are some questions that can’t be

answered by GOOGLE!” That’s so true! And the many of the most important of those questions often fall to the realms of faith.

But here’s the catch again. Jesus said, “Ask, knock, seek . . .” He didn’t say, “Just wait around long enough and it will come to you.” So to find the full benefit and privilege of belonging, to pursue the answers to our deepest questions, we’ve got to engage, and ask, and seek, and knock. And here is the wondrous paradox. When we become sure of our answers, God sends us questions; and when we are overwhelmed with questions, God whispers in ways we never would have expected.

So gracious me! How privileged we are! How incredibly privileged! May we each come to know this again today. And may we know, too, that the best benefit, the deepest privilege of belonging, comes to those who engage and give, offer and arrive, participate and contribute. In the name of the One whose invitation and love opens us fully to the wondrous endowment of life! Amen.

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¹ Kevin Helliker. “Body and Spirit: Why Attending Religious Services May Benefit Health” Wall Street Journal, May 3, 2005, p. 1.

² Robert Putnam, et al. “Congregants Make Better Citizens” in Christian Century, June 16, 2009, p. 16.