

Excuses, Excuses

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Scripture

Luke 9:57-62

Ephesians 1:15-23

Sermon

My grandmother was a fifth grade teacher in a small country school in central Louisiana. From the beginning of the school year until about mid-October, many kids came to school barefooted. It was very rural and very poor. One little boy had a bad habit of neglecting his homework. He had various excuses, including, “My dog ate it.” He used that excuse a number of times. My grandmother later told me he came to school one day without his work and she asked him if his dog had eaten it again. He said, “No, my baby sister did. And she’s not feeling too good right now.”

We all have heard or used excuses at one time or another.

As it turns out, the baby sister really did eat her brother’s homework. So, is that an excuse – or a reason?

What excuses do people use for not attending church? In 2014, the Pew Research center conducted a study and found that 41% of millennials (born from 1981 – 1996) say that religion is very important and 52% say they believe in God with absolute certainty. But only 27% attend religious services and yet 76% have some sense of thankfulness and gratitude. Fifty-five per cent say they think about meaning and purpose of life. About one-third of the millennials claim no religious affiliation. Those are appalling numbers.

When you and I were growing up, were those the numbers we would expect to hear? Probably not. Religious affiliation had been on a slow decline for a few decades. More and more Presbyterian churches are now 100 members or less and the average age of members is climbing. That means we are losing younger members faster than the older ones.

In May of 2015, two focus groups of adults ages 22 to 35 were formed in Portland, Oregon to discuss their views on religion and spirituality and some interesting things came out of those discussions. There was a high level of institutional distrust, whether it was government, business, educational, or

religious. Much of their impressions of church came from the media with a whole array of negative connotations. Some said churches do good things, but only to lure you into their control and make you become members. Many looked at religion as antiquated thinking and spirituality as just individual interpretation. Most were not interested in a traditional religious service **but** showed strong interest in community issues.

A lot of this does not surprise me. Authority was, for the most part, followed without question during the Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower years. We had heroes, both religious and secular, who could do no wrong and their wisdom and counsel was without question. But, authority and blind allegiance began to lose its hold on us during the 60's because of things like Viet Nam, and then honesty and integrity became orphans in the wake of Watergate. Those traditions began to diminish like a slow turn of a water faucet. Funny thing about traditions; you cannot invent a tradition. You can only inherit it. Something becomes a tradition only when it is given to you by someone else.

So, somehow, someone has to come up with a new twist of an old idea, like going to church, and pass it down. Wonderful! Let's start that this afternoon! What a great idea! Where do we start?

How many of you have read *A Walk in the Woods* by Bill Bryson? Good story and it also has some true facts about our country. As of 2016, the Appalachian Trail is about 80 years old. By American standards, that's a long time. The Oregon and Santa Fe trails didn't last that long. Route 66 didn't. The coast to coast Lincoln Highway, also known as "America's Main Street" did not last as long. Few things in America do. If a product or enterprise doesn't constantly reinvent itself, it is superseded, cast aside, abandoned without sentiment in favor of something bigger, newer, and alas, nearly always uglier. Sound familiar? Still want to start this afternoon?

Good question. Try this: go online and look up 'Reasons for not attending church.' I did, and you get several lists. So, I printed up three and compared them and I found reasons – and excuses. To my eyes, the top three excuses, ones that seem to repeat themselves, could be grouped like this: 1) the church is full of hypocrites, 2) it is not meaningful and when I go, I do not feel fed, 3) social conflicts.

We live in an age of instant communication. Any time a church is hit with something negative, something that supports the false idea that we are all a bunch of hypocrites, people find out about it fast and in a widespread manner. It's what makes the news. How unfortunate it is that the good stuff does not get equal time. But wait, what if their claim about hypocrites has some substance? Do we confess one thing and then do something else? Who is watching us?

So, what about church not being meaningful? I remember that church was meaningful when I was growing up because I saw people who enjoyed being there. Now, as we are older, we remember the hymns, the sermons, the warm feelings – and we have a sense of satisfaction. An inward feeling, personal, reassuring, comforting, inside – me. What about the person sitting two rows in front of me, across the aisle, five rows back? Do we think of them? What if there is someone who has come to church with a challenge in the heart that says, “Okay, I'm here. Show me what you are talking about!” Could you tell them what worship is all about? Throwing scripture at someone won't help. Can you remember to tell them that worship is our way of proclaiming that God is God and we are not, but we are loved by Him more than anything on this earth? Worship is how we renew our faith, by hearing about God's love over and over again, brought to us by the Holy Spirit. Tell them that, for Christians, worship is an absolute necessity. Tell them how we reinforce each other when we come together. When we see others praising God with us, it multiplies our faith. If someone feels he/she is not being fed, that person is not really aware of the rest of the church family.

Over the years, in various places, I have heard people leave church saying, “I wasn't fed today.” This is total self-indulgence; what I call the “Spiritual Fantasy” mode. It is done on our terms, at our own convenience, and with our own preconceived outcome. Those who do this are looking to come away with a warm, cozy feeling. It cost nothing, is done in total privacy, and creates or accomplishes nothing. This is not sanctimonious me speaking. I am sometimes the worst example of loving God on my own terms.

And the last big excuse I found was social conflicts. Someone actually said, “I go to brunch on Sundays.” Someone else said, “My child has a gift for athletics and we practice on Sundays. The way I characterize this last excuse is simply that of reversed priorities.

I might add that I think there are too many distractions today. We live in a world of exciting discovery and innovation. There's never enough time to text all my friends, play all the video games, plug in my I-pod and listen to all the top hits. Just not enough time to "Be still and know that I am God."

In fact, reversed priority is a common factor in all excuses. How do we get around that? Why are the priorities backwards?

Each day, when you rise from sleep, you plan your day. It may not be a conscious act with a pad of paper, but you do start listing things in your head. And you decide which is more important; what needs your attention now and what can wait. How can you make the best of your time? Which one do you look forward to the most? That's a good one. At any rate, we prioritize every day of our lives. And so much of it comes from what we see as our needs. For you who are here today, I hope you feel a need to worship God. I hope that is why you are here. What about those who never come from outside these walls? Apparently, they feel no need.

The bible tells us the path is narrow and I take that to mean we cannot open the eyes of everyone. But, the trend worries me. Is there something I should be doing? Is there something you should be doing? Do I sit with satisfaction, looking at my get-out-of-jail card and tell the others to get their own card? I don't think so.

But there is hope. One thing the surveys seem to touch on repeatedly is that the unchurched feel a general desire to behave proactively in their community. So do we. That is where we can interact. That's where we can work side by side with strangers and let them see our joy in just living. Do you remember the slogan, "Smile and make people wonder what you're thinking." Don't get me wrong; this is not a sermon about smiley faces. But, take that example and expand it. Happiness that comes from God's love is obvious; it just shows. When someone is happy just being alive, it shows. You can even do this in the checkout line. Think what this world would be like if every Christian did this, every day. The results won't come like an Instagram, with the push of a button. Negative momentum takes time and small baby steps to turn itself around and become positive.

The best we can do is to be authentic. Do not change yourself just to market the gospel. Be yourself, your joyous God-inspired self. For the person who is searching for meaning, the only way he/she can have trustworthy knowledge of God is for God's grace to break into their lives in a special way; a way far

different than what they could tell themselves about God. That's how the Holy Spirit works. It starts with God. And we can be a catalyst in that event. Maybe God starts it in you. I tell you, we ARE being watched.

God has made humankind in such a way that we instinctively long for Him and we should not forget that. Indeed, British novelist Julian Barnes says, "I don't believe in God, but I miss Him." In other words, the world is a target-rich environment for us.

Let's look at our scripture for today. In Luke, Jesus is approached by three different men. The first man says he wants to follow Jesus and Jesus tells him what the cost is for that. He explains that following him may not be a cake walk.

The second man said he wanted to bury his father first. Now, we know that in Jewish custom, when someone dies, there is no delay in holding the funeral and placing the body in a tomb or a grave. So, most likely, he meant that his father was an old man and would die – someday. Jesus saw through his excuse. This second man sounds like he wanted to appear interested, but had other things that took priority at that moment.

The third man wanted to go back home and say go-bye first. Now that sounds reasonable, but Jesus knew it meant undetermined delay and the delay would effect this man just like the second man.

Jesus mentions the hand to the plow. I don't know how many of you have ever plowed behind a mule, but my dad spent many hours looking at the south end of a north-bound mule. He would attest that if you don't keep your eyes forward and watch where the mule is going, you will never get a straight furrow. When you make a commitment, you never look back.

So, following Christ is not some whimsical decision that requires no depth of thought, no dedication. And the unchurched of this world will use that as their best excuse ever. "I don't have the time or the inclination," they would say. Psalm 10 says, "In his pride, the wicked does not seek Him; in all his thoughts, there is no room for God." But you can be the living example of God's will and pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire and motivate others.

In the meantime, when we see others of this church family giving their time and labor to God, we should applaud and affirm their efforts. This is what Paul did in the verses today that come from the letter to the Ephesians. Let's

read the first part of it again, because this is my applause to you, my church family:

“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know Him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of the glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”

God bless all of you.

Amen.