

“TWO ARE BETTER THAN ONE,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 22, 2022

In our morning lesson from the book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostle Paul stands in the middle of the Areopagus of Athens, a high hill where the city’s judges and philosophers meet. (*Acts 17:16-34*) There Paul preaches the gospel on behalf of Jesus Christ.

In what has been called the Apostle’s own little “Sermon on the Mount,” he starts out by flattering his Athenian audience which has a reputation for intellectual sophistication and a lot of talk. Spying a nearby altar which the men and women of Athens have erected and dedicated “to an unknown God,” he praises the Athenians. (*Acts 17:23*) He calls them very religious. But then Paul goes on to inform the Athenians that for all their religiousness something vital is missing. Mere speculation about God, Paul insists, is not enough to enjoy a fulfilled and worthwhile life. What the Athenians really need to do is make a commitment to Jesus Christ who, as the embodiment of the living God, is the true source of salvation that everyone is consciously or unconsciously seeking.

How do the Athenians respond to Paul? They scoff at his sermon. Indeed, on that occasion amid the high and mighty of Athens, Paul does not win many converts to the gospel. The Book of Acts very frankly informs us that only a handful are persuaded, most notably among them a jurist named Dionysius and a woman named Damaris. (*Acts 17:34*)

As I read about Paul’s encounters with the Athenians on the Areopagus Hill, I am rather struck by the similarities between ancient Athens and 21st century America. Like the Athenians of old, Americans are, for the most part, literate, intelligent people with a religious bent. Polls continue to report that at least four out of five Americans report a belief in God. In the media, religion and spirituality are perennial topics of interest and discussion. Religious publishers continue to do a booming business: books and spirituality constantly make the nation’s best-seller lists.

At the same time, all this religiosity doesn’t necessarily translate into a seriously committed faith. Pre-Covid only half of all Americans reported church membership. Just 18.7 per cent of all Americans actually attend the Christian church today. No more than 28 per cent indicate that they attend worship at least two times per month. That’s six per cent down from 34 per cent in pre-pandemic days for churches of all stripes across America.

For many Christians and non-Christians alike, religion has become a completely private affair. Religious individualism reigns. There’s no longer any widespread recognition regarding the importance of participating in a religious community where there is moral accountability, both to God and others.

Sociologists who study this present-day phenomena tell us that it had its start in the 1960s when a distrust of institutions, accelerated by public conflict over the Vietnam War, also impacted Americans' attitudes towards churches. As people began to "do their own thing," they also began to opt out of church. A lot of folks convinced themselves that they could be better Christians all on their own. "I don't need church to be a good person," became a commonly expressed sentiment. You, like me, now hear it all the time, sometimes from our own kids. Because of this attitude, churches of all backgrounds have witnessed huge declines in attendance and support.

In addition, life within our Christian churches has changed. Some church-goers began to bring a very individualistic, "do my own thing" mentality to their Sunday morning pew. The result has been less loyalty and commitment to Christianity as a moral and spiritual way of life to be shared with others. Some time back when I attended a mega church service, I was surprised to observe folks seated for the service turning in to the I-phones to entertain themselves when they got bored. Essentially, they were carving out their own little private space in a time and place that is supposed to be meant for group worship and togetherness.

Now, there may be some religions in this world which teach you can secure salvation on your own without any sacrifice or commitment beyond yourself. But Christianity is not one of them. Fundamental to Christianity is the conviction that we need each other to be faithful and attain fulfillment as God's children. As Christians, we are called to live with each other and for each other as part of the community. Again and again, the Bible makes clear that we have a responsibility to live out our lives in community.

At the start of the Bible when earth and the human race are first created, our God is heard to say: "It is not good for man to dwell alone." (*Genesis 2:18*) Similarly, Jesus, as God's own son, emphasizes that we can never be good disciples all alone either. After commissioning his twelve apostles, Jesus repeatedly sends them out in pairs to preach, teach, and heal. (*Mark 6:2, 11:1, 14:30*) Here, Jesus strictly abides by the wisdom of the Old Testament Sage Ecclesiastes who noted that "two are better than one... For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow." (*Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*) Plainly, Jesus does not believe in solo acts – at least not when it comes to ministry or life in his name. He knew that, in our frailty as human beings we need each other in order to lead lives that remain morally upright and worthy of God. This is why Jesus both anticipated and endorsed the need to found a church, or assembly of the faithful, declaring the apostle Peter the rock upon which it would be built. (*Matthew 16:18*). To this day the moral frailty of men and women continues to make the church community essential in keeping us all accountable, honest, upright, and good.

I think we all know that no Christian church or community is perfect. Although church

members are called to serve God, we can sometimes serve him badly. Like everyone else, Christians have egos. Those who claim discipleship in Christ can be petty, backbiting, and greedy. Just look at some of the financial scandals that roiled the very public ministries of televangelists Kenneth Copeland and Joel Osteen. Consider too the sexually predatory behaviors of Roman Catholic priests who molested children. Their sins were compounded by church hierarchy who covered up the abuse for years. Still, in spite of these terrible mistakes and defects on the part of religious institutions, which should never be excused or tolerated whenever uncovered and disclosed, the church community remains the sacred space where ordinary men and women like ourselves can seek and find the spiritual nourishment encouragement we need to live and act more like saints in greater harmony with God's holy will and purposes. The church is the place where, in the most practical terms, love is taught, forgiveness is found, and hope is rediscovered. What a precious gift to us all, made possible through the grace and spirit of Jesus Christ.

In the second decade of the 21st century, no one but God can know exactly where the Christian church is headed. There may yet be boom years ahead for the Christian church before God's kingdom comes. There is an extraordinary growth in the numbers of people coming to Christ on the continent of Africa and Asia. Vital churches seem to be springing up everywhere there.

On the other hand, in other parts of the world, the Church of Jesus Christ may face more mellow times in which a minority of people bear Christ's standard for others. Right here in Metro Detroit, I think we're going to see one third or more of all Protestant and Roman Catholic churches closing over the next decade, leaving fewer, but larger churches, to carry on.

But amid any uncertainty, one thing remains sure. Nothing can really replace the church or fill the gaps left in an individual life where there is no affiliation or involvement with a community of faith like our own. What was true for the generations of our parents and grandparents remains true today. Church people have a better chance to live more fulfilled lives. At the moment Facebook and Instagram may have mass appeal. But no virtual community can compete with a real community of caring, loving people that the church provides. In fact, studies are now showing the folks hooked on Facebook are some of the loneliest people in the world. By contrast active church-going people report better health and more satisfaction with their lives generally. Yes, church still matters. Being part of a faith community gathered in the name of Jesus Christ can make a huge difference in our lives. Very significantly, professors Tyler VanderWeele and Brenda Case, who direct the Human Flourishing Program in the School of Public Health and devote themselves full-time to the study of American health and disease trends have pointedly remarked that "Empty pews are an American public health crisis." Clear and compelling biostatistics that VanderWeele and Case collect bear this out.

I find it ironic that the time when so many folks insist that they don't need church for the support of the Christian community to be good, we see selfishness spiking and crime and corruption flourishing in all aspects of life, whether politics, business, or the arts. We also see drug addiction becoming rampant as people try to cope with emotional and physical pain or simply cover-up some great void in their lives. In a poll of New Englanders, who live in one of the least church regions of the United States, one in four persons personally knew someone addicted to heroin. Meanwhile, we now live in fear that someone with an unhinged or undeveloped conscience is going to shoot up the playground, the church, the local mall, or the nightclub where we and our sons and daughters gather. Underlying all this social chaos is an undiagnosed moral and spiritual crisis in an America where folks think they are too good to need church and that the problem is always with everybody else.

If our society is going to retain more than the mere veneer of civilization, Americans need to be focusing less on selfish impulses, individual pursuits, and narcissistic fantasies. Instead, we should be getting renewed attention to faith, caring values, and active participation in Christian communities that embody the loving spirit of Jesus and thereby conscience to make us fit human beings. (*John 14:20-21*) Accordingly, our faith life should matter more to us than our fantasy life or sports and entertainment.

As the sixteenth-century British poet John Donne once said: "no man is an island." If Donne were alive today, he would similarly say that no woman is an island either. We should not pretend that we are islands when it comes to our moral and social well-being. People need people. People need accountability. People need to know Jesus Christ in the most intimate way for the sake of their own salvation and the health of our larger society. These needs are always best met in a Christian community together.

In my daily life, I seek to be a good person. But I am humble enough to realize that I'm never too good or too spiritual to need church. Are you too good, too spiritual to need church? Even if today we, as church-going Christians, are but a minority among Americans – a faithful fifth or maybe a faithful quarter – we are preserving a way of life that remains the best hope for the future well-being of our nation and the larger world. Our lives can be a powerful witness to the eternal value of togetherness in Christ.

Two are better than one. And three and more, reaching upward and outward to a full multitude, are better still. After all, did not Jesus proclaim that where two or three are gathered in his name, his presence and grace will be especially felt and known? (*Matthew 18:20*) Let us trust that God will use our positive example of faithfulness together to help redeem the lives of many more men and women and build up his church and ministry on earth, as well as in heaven. **Amen.**