

The Pillars of the Church

2. Presence

Hebrews 10:24-25

If you are a member of the church, at some point you have probably taken the vow of membership. You are asked if you will support the United Methodist Church with your prayers, your presence, your gifts and your service. Those are the four pillars of the church. We know that Christ is the foundation of the church. The church is the body of Christ. We are built upon Christ. The church exists so that Christ can continue his ministry of sharing the good news of salvation and building the kingdom of God here on earth, calling on people to live the way God intended for us to live, to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The church exists to serve Christ. Christ is our foundation.

But the church also sits on four pillars. These four pillars lift the church. How high the church is lifted depends on how faithful the members are to fulfill their vows. The more faithful the church members are in praying for the church, attending the church worship services and functions, giving to the church and working in and through the church, the greater and more glorious the church is and the more effective it will be in meeting the needs of the church members and fulfilling its mission to the world.

We want Chapelwood to be the very best church it can possibly be. That's why we are lifting up these four pillars of the church as we have completed a summer of rest and travel and now we turn back to the work to which we have been called. My hope is that we will all rededicate ourselves to the mission and ministry of Christ in Chapelwood during these four weeks, as we remind one another of the commitments we made to the church when we became members.

Last week Shannon reminded you of the importance of praying for the church. Of course, telling this church to pray is like telling a teenager to eat pizza. As she said, this is a praying church. The members of Chapelwood are very intentional in praying for one another and for the ministry of the church. We just need to remind one another to keep it up. Keep praying. Your prayers lift Chapelwood high. Keep lifting the church up in your prayers.

This morning I want to talk about lifting the church by your attendance.

At the heart of the church is the assembly. The church is, first and foremost, people who gather together week by week, to worship God. This is the heart of the church.

We come together because Christ said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there among them." When we come together, Christ is present with us by the Holy Spirit. In union with the Spirit of Christ, we enter into the presence of God. This is a holy time and a holy place. This is where the people of God come together in the presence of God.

By our attendance, we contribute to the sacredness of this moment. And we lift the church higher. By being here, we are saying to one another, "There is nothing more important to me than being here with the church in the presence of God."

And just the opposite is true when we are not here. When we are absent from the assembly, we are saying, “There is someplace else I would rather be than in the assembly of those gathered together in the presence of God.”

Jesus tells a parable of a man who gave a banquet and invited all the people whose company he wanted to enjoy. He invited his neighbors and his family and his friends. He spent much time and money preparing a grand banquet. To his dismay, on the day of the banquet, many of the people he invited didn't even bother to show up. They had many excuses. One of them sent word that he had just gotten married and wanted to stay home with his new wife. Another sent word that he had just bought a piece of land, and he was spending the day examining it. Another had bought a team of oxen and decided this was the day to go get them. As the man looked around the banquet room and saw the empty places, he understood that what they were all really saying is, “I would rather not spend this time with you.”

On Sunday morning, when we see the empty places, we offer our excuses up to God for those who are not there. But God understands clearly what they are saying. They are saying, “I would rather not spend this time with you.”

The sacredness of the moment is diminished by those who by their absence are saying, “I would rather be somewhere else.” That's why Hebrews says to us, “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...”

We are all encouraged by those that we know will be here if they possibly can. There are those that if they are not in church, you had better check on them. Because, unless something is bad wrong, they are going to be in church.

Guess what we call those people. We call them the pillars of the church. And that is exactly what they are. Every time they attend church, they lift it higher and higher.

You have the ability to lift the church and encourage its members. You do it every time you come to church. You can be a pillar of the church.

You do have to make the church a priority. But church ought to be a priority. What is more important than being in the presence of God? Does God have first place in our lives—or not? Do we come into the presence of God only when we don't have something more important or more interesting to do?

Sure, there are times when the ox is in the ditch. Sometimes things happen that we just have to take care of.

I feel kind of funny talking to you about the importance of attending church when I was gone last Sunday myself. But the ox was in the ditch. My daughter-in-law's family live half-way around the world. She and my son needed us to be there to support them as she recovered from childbirth. They needed us to take care of our grandson. And I needed to be there to see my new granddaughter. You all know how important to me my grandchildren are. But, as important to me as they are, the church is more important. The majority of the time I am in church on Sunday morning, not visiting with my grandchildren.

But you're the preacher. Of course you'd rather be in church on Sunday. I haven't always been a preacher. From the time I was 11 years old, I have seldom missed church. I have had preachers who couldn't preach their way out of a paper bag, and I was there every Sunday. I once attended a church in which the people were cold as ice. I was

there every Sunday. I grew up in a church that sang hymns that I never liked. I was in church every Sunday.

I was in church because I felt the presence of God in the worship service. I was hungry for that presence. I still am.

When I miss church, it leaves an empty feeling in my heart. I hate that feeling, and so I don't miss church unless I just can't help it. Only if the ox is in the ditch...

If your ox is in the ditch, you can't help it. But if your ox is in the ditch every Sunday, then you've got a spiritual issue. For whatever reason, you would rather be somewhere else than in the presence of God.

The presence of God is in the assembly of the people of God. It is not in the preaching. It is not in the style of worship. It is not in the music. It is not in the building. We do our best in all these things to enhance the awareness of the presence of God. But Jesus didn't say, "If you will sing contemporary choruses in a lively, well-constructed worship service and a beautiful worship setting and the preacher makes the rafters ring, I will be there." He said, "If two or three are gathered together in my name, I will be there."

You bring the presence of Christ into the worship service. Your being here makes the presence of God real. You open the way for the Spirit of Christ to enter into our gathering—just by being here.

You are a pillar of the church. By your presence you lift the church to a higher level.

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