

OUTLINE: "WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE OUT OF CHURCH?"

I. Introduction

- A. Today, according to the calendar of the church year, is Pentecost.
- B. Now to begin with, we know that some people are kept out of the church because they are cabbages.
- C. I realize all too well that a sermon that tries to answer this question has a great deal against it....because.

II. Fear of organized religion

- A. In the first place, I would say that it may be a fear of organized religion that is keeping many people away from the church.
- B. Let's just take a moment to examine the place of organization in life in general. Consider the case of the man....
- C. I'm anxious for you to see the place of organization in life.
- D. And while on the subject, let me just say something concerning the place and importance of routine in religion.
- E. To be sure, religion is always in this danger of being over-organized....

III. The faith of orthodox Christianity

- A. The second thing that keeps some people out of church is the faith and message of what you might call orthodox Christianity.
- B. What about the faith of the Church. In connection with this, let me offer two suggestions.
- C. And then second, learn to distinguish.....
- D. One of the wonderful things about Methodism is this...
- E. But some of you may say, well, that's all right....
- F. What I would like to suggest is this....

IV. The failure of the people already in it.

- A. All of this brings us to the third point of this sermon....
- B. What about these black sheep.
- C. These then are just three of the things.....

Poem. Prayer.

"WHAT KEEPS PEOPLE OUT OF CHURCH?"

INTRODUCTION

Pentecost is often referred to as the "Birthday of the Church". Actually it's rather difficult to put your finger on the exact day on which the church was born. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is the day on which the followers of Jesus were given the power to continue his ministry in the world. Several minutes ago you heard St. Luke's account of what took place on this occasion - how they were gathered together in the upper room, how they were suddenly possessed by a power far greater than themselves, a power that enabled them to do things that they never thought they would be able to do, and how from that little room experience they went out into the world to continue the ministry of Jesus, to live for it, and to die for it. We are their successors. In connection with this, I have chosen to preach on a subject that does have a direct bearing upon this continuing ministry of Jesus in our world today. The subject grows out of a serious problem, and might be put in this fashion: what is it that is keeping people out of the churches today?

Now to begin with, we know that some people are kept out of the church because, in a sense, they are cabbages. They're satisfied to germinate, vegetate, and deteriorate. This is about all that they ask from life, and naturally they find very little meaning and attraction in the church. You know people who fall into this category, but these aren't the people that I'm concerned with this morning. On the other hand, there are a great many people - serious minded people, public spirited people, clean living people, people who are alive spiritually - and yet people who never come to church. What is it that keeps them out of church? There are close to seventy million people who fall into this category in this country. There are young men and women coming out of our colleges today who have no sense of responsibility towards the church. What is it that is keeping them out of the church?

Now I realize all too well that a sermon that tries to deal with such a question has a great deal against it from the very beginning simply because the people we're talking about are not here. There may be some of you however who are on the fringe of this situation, and who perhaps are, shall I say, susceptible to ~~this~~ what I say. There may be others of you who are here today who may rest on strong foundations, and so I am depending on you to carry what is said here outside to other people. What is it then, that is keeping so many people out of church today?

FEAR OF ORGANIZED RELIGION

First of all I would say that it may be a fear of organized religion that is keeping people away. I think there are many people in our country today who are serious minded and deeply religious but who carefully avoid any church. They feel that the religious spirit it is a delicate thing, that it must be kept free, that there must be nothing that will restrain or restrict it. They feel that organization kills it and institutional religion suffocates it. They're afraid that the spirit of religion will be caught and crushed in the machinery of the church, and it is organized religion, therefore, and the fear of it that keeps them out of church.

In general, let's just take a moment to look at the place of organization in life. Consider the case of the man who wants to eat and eat well, but who doesn't want to subject himself to organized meals. He wants to eat what he wants, when he wants it, where he wants it, and how he

wants it. He doesn't want to be tied down to any particular time or table. I almost hesitate to comment on the actions of such a person. You know as well as I do that this man who doesn't want to have anything to do with organized meals will probably stay alive, but he'll probably become either extremely fat or extremely thin. In the long run, he may destroy the proper balance of chemicals in the body and become sick.

I'm anxious for you to see that effective organization gets things done, and it gets them done properly, smoothly and regularly. And I for one am prepared to say that a person whose religion is disorganized will find that sooner or later it will grow thin and perhaps disappear. I think it's true that if we depend on the impulse of the moment or wait for the spirit to move us, we wouldn't say our prayers very often, or read the Bible frequently, or think on the great things of God with any consistent regularity. It's not safe to leave these things to chance. If there were no fixed time for worship and no prepared procedure, how many of you would be worshipping at this very moment. The chances are that you could be saying your prayers at home in bed, or out on the golf course, or walking through the woods, but would you be doing it? I think not. You see we depend on a certain amount of organization to keep our religion healthy and to keep it strong and meaningful!

And while on the subject, let me just emphasize the importance of routine in religion. Routine, you know, can be dull, and the person who lives by routine alone is not always the most interesting person. But on the other hand, you know this too, that a life without routine can be a dissipated life. And it's true in religion. Attending church Sunday after Sunday can become a very routine thing. You come out of habit. You come and sometimes feel nothing and experience nothing. It may bother you, but I would add this thought that it's up to you to prevent it from becoming a matter of ~~making~~ empty routine. But, and it's a very important but, if you give up the routine and wait for the spirit to move you, you may never be moved. The spirit needs tracks to travel on, and a person with regular religious habits is likely to go farther and soar higher than the person without any.

To be sure, religion is always in this danger of being over-organized. It's not good. A surplus of red tape is the surest way to strangle the spirit of a person. Perhaps we who have been raised in the tradition of the Methodist Church or the Episcopal Church or the Roman Catholic Church can appreciate this fact. It's often been said of the Methodist Church that if it could find another level on which to organize, it would soon organize. Certainly over-organization is not good, but the answer to over-organized religious life is not no organization at all, but less organization, wider organization. For in religion, as in other areas of life, organization facilitates and enhances life!

THE FAITH OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY

The second thing that keeps some people out of church is the faith and the message of what you might call orthodox Christianity. According to my observations, there are a great many honest, sincere young ~~people~~ men and women who hate hypocrisy like they hate the devil, and who cannot honestly accept ~~the~~ all of the articles of the Christian faith as contained, shall we say, in the Apostles' Creed. It is the faith and the message of much that exists in contemporary Christianity that they cannot accept, and for this reason they are staying away from the church.

What about the faith of the Church. In connection with this, let

me suggest two thoughts to the person who is in this situation. Before you say you do not believe the orthodox faith of the church, be sure you know what it is, and when we ask you to do that, we ask you not to be content with a child's knowledge of the faith, but to pursue that knowledge until it is knowledge worthy of an adult. Know what it's all about before you reject it.

And then second, learn to distinguish between the primary and the secondary articles of the Christian faith. You'll find that in the Apostles' Creed, if you read it intelligently, that there are certain articles that stand out like great cornerstones and then there are others that are secondary, surrounding and supporting those cornerstones. You might like to have an example or two of what I mean. The Christian faith in the Incarnation (i. e. God revealed in Jesus) is primary. The church has confessed this doctrine down through the ages of time that as much of God was in Jesus as can possibly ever be in a human being. This is basic. On the other hand, the doctrine of the Virgin Birth, that is, the method or way by which God accomplished this is secondary. Let's take another example. I would say that the doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus is basic. The church all through the years has confessed its faith in the fact that the spirit of Jesus is still alive, and that this spirit dwells in human hearts and animates human lives. On the other hand, I would say that the belief that the physical body of Jesus rose from the dead is secondary. It is only one way of interpreting the resurrection of Jesus.

One of the wonderful things about Methodism is this, that within our tradition we are presented with a great framework of faith - belief in God, Belief in a God who has revealed himself in Christ, belief in a God whose spirit is still at work in the hearts and minds of people today, and within this framework, we have freedom to move about as our own minds and consciences prompt us to move. We're not forced into a straightjacket of dogmatic belief. We have a good deal of elbow room, theologically speaking, - the right to interpret and understand and retranslate the details of the Christian faith. So keep this in mind if you're involved in this situation. Learn to make a distinction between what is primary and what is secondary.

But some of you may say, well, that's all right about the details of the faith, but it's the great framework that holds me back. It's the assumption that life does make sense, that Christ's character is the standard for all men, that there is a life after death - these are the things that I cannot accept. You cannot feel them. Well, of course, is after mature thought you cannot accept such assumptions then you do have reason to stay out of church.

What I would like to suggest is something like this. Don't try to take it all in at one time. Reach out ~~xxxxxx~~ to it with the best that's in you. Give yourself to it and grow into it. If you're ready to accept the total outlook of the church and are ready to look at life from that point of view, and if you're ready to make your judgments in that frame of reference, and if in general the church represents the kind of life you would like to live, then I think you can and perhaps ought to say to yourself, "I belong in the church. I ought to commit my life to some branch of the church, and accept my responsibility as a mature member of a mature society.

FAILURE OF PEOPLE ALREADY IN IT

And so all of this leads us into the third point of this sermon. Occasionally we find some people who are kept out of the church because of the failure

of the people already in it. Every church has its black sheep. Occasionally we read about minister who run off with other men's wives, and treasurer's who steal the church funds, and church members in public life who do not do what they ought to do. Then there are others who are not notorious, only neutral and negative. They don't amount to much one way or the other. They poor advertisement for any church. We recognize this, and I for one have a great deal of sympathy with the people on the outside, wanting to live a good life, wanting to put their life where it will count the most, looking at us and saying "well if that's the kind of thing the church produces, I'd just as soon stay ~~away~~ out of it"

What about these black sheep. I think it's wrong to make any final judgment about anything on the basis of an experience with one or two black sheep. Just because you may have run up against a doctor who was a quack, you don't say, I'm through with doctors forever, and with medicine and with health. No....we shouldn't make our judgments about anything or any ~~one~~ people on the basis of the black sheep. We ought to make our final judgments on the basis of two considerations: first, is it true? and second, does it work? Medicine, is it true? Does it help people to get well? Or final judgment of the church and the cause that it represents ought to made the same way and not on the basis of what one or two black sheep do. Is it true? You see it all rests on the spirit of the living God? Is he true or is He not? Has he the power to change human lives or has he not? Has the Christ-spirit the power to transform society or has it not? From my own experiences with the work and life of the Christian church, I have never known a person who could say no to that question. Sometimes I wish I could forget about pastoral confidences and just tell you specifically about some of the things that have happened to people in this church, people who have come here worn right down to the nub of life, and somehow in the great mystery of God have been revived. People who have sat next to some of you in the pews of this church, people who have later said, "the only thing that kept me going through that experience was the church". The longer you live in this kind of Christianity community, the more you feel the truth and the power of it. It is upon this basis that a person's judgment regarding the church ought to be made.

These then are just three of the things that keep some people away from church. To be sure there are others - laziness, indifference, petty annoyances. But you know when you look at these particular reasons seriously and carefully, you realize that these are three things that ought to be drawing people into the church:

- First: Is there anything that we need more in this disorderly life of ours, in which people live a hand to mouth existence without any roots and anchors, is there anything we need more than the disciplined, orderly organization of a religious life and church?
- Second: In this time when nobody knows just what to believe and what not to believe, is there anything that we need more than a coherent framework of faith upon which we are willing to act and base our lives in order to be saved from the shallow thinking of current fashion?
- Third: And if we need that from the church, is there anything the church needs more, remembering the black sheep, than new life and new blood of fresh, young, critical, intelligent people who are willing to come into it because they believe it to be true because they sense the power and value of it, and are willing to give to it their energy and their interest because they want to make their lives count for something good!