

I Couldn't Come to Church

From the Minister's Desktop (The Missioner, April 2009)

"I couldn't come to church," she said through tears. "Everyone there is so together, so happy and, you know, just *together!* And here I am and everything is just falling apart. I just couldn't come!"

It's enough to break a pastor's heart.

"Well," said another, "I have lost my job and I can't keep up my pledge. I'm ashamed. I can't come to church."

"You read my kid's name in the court news, didn't you?" He was very defensive. "I know that everyone is talking about it. And you're asking why I'm not in church. We have to work this out ourselves. Besides, why didn't you call us?"

"Pastor," said one parishioner, "I ran in to Mr. Marina at the Mall the other day. I realized that we hadn't seen him in church for a long time and I told him we missed him. He said that no one ever came to call on him, so he didn't come to church any more."

"I guess I just don't like rich people," said one former member when asked why church held no continuing appeal. Another said that there seemed to be too many badly dressed people nowadays—not like it used to be. "It's shameful. I just don't feel comfortable."

"It's really none of your business," said one. "This is entirely our affair. When we need your help, we'll ask for it."

"Yes, I'll tell you why," said another. "I was in the hospital for almost a month and you didn't call on me once! . . . Well, no. I didn't call you; but you should know these things!"

These are samplings from across many years. Still, they are stories that stay in mind. They are not all from this parish, though I suppose they could be. They take their place among the usual charges against all churches—hypocrisy, money-grubbing, unfriendly (or, perhaps, too relaxed), too political (or not political enough), and so on.

These are hard times. People are frightened. There are very real threats to investments, to future plans, to present living arrangements. Families continue to be torn. Friendships continue to unravel. Employment in many places is uncertain.

Please don't wait to come to church until you have everything together! Please don't stay away because of money—what you should, can, or can't give! Please remember that the church – every church that seriously seeks to join Jesus in his walk and his work – knows suffering and invites sufferers, is hospitable to those who bear heavy burdens and who seek rest and healing, is hopeful in the midst of ruins. None of us have it all together. There is no place in the world more aware of this fact than the church.

But you do have to come. You have to call. Jesus did not intrude himself upon those who did not seek his company. Though there are bitter charges these days that the church tries to impose its vision of life upon the society, church life is not like that at all. The church stands, with all its warts and failings (including the impression it often gives of having it all together) as “a home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way”, as well as a place and a people in which God awakens us to love and to work.

When we think of the church, we need to remember that “God has already taken the initiative. Like one who walks in late to a meeting [you or I enter] a complex situation in which God has already said decisive words and acted in decisive ways [as in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!]. [Our] work is not necessarily to announce that but to discover what he is doing and live appropriately with it.”¹

What does this mean, practically, for our life together? It means that when you come here as an individual, or when you arrive here with your children, this church seeks to involve you in the most important, life-changing community you will ever know. And, it will take you years to discover this because things here are so, well, ordinary. And also because no one really has it all together!

We make no claim that we preach an attractive gospel, we are clumsy with PowerPoint and high tech, we sing old songs and read old books, we sit down a lot and talk. We invite you to talent shows where many people will perform in ways that may not compete well with what you can get on cable. We invite you to take a teenager, barely in High School, and share your faith with her or with him, drawing them into the bosom of Christ. You will be invited as soon as you can and as much as you can to get busy serving others in various missions and ministries of the church. You may do things that make you feel a little awkward and uncomfortable. But never doubt that you are welcome in the struggle.

We insist that children be quiet—no, not so much in worship where they mostly are anyway, but quiet with themselves. They live in a world that won't leave them alone. They have cell phones and computers and home work that would give most of us a headache, and team sports and obligations that will prepare them for the particular illnesses and afflictions for which our culture has become famous. We can't turn all that off, but we can invite them to be still, to listen for God, to look at and to grow to love the beauty of the world and the loveliness of those with whom they share this place. We invite everyone to that stillness of soul, and to regular worship of God—this brief interlude in our days when we remember why we are living this life in the first place.

All this is the most important work you will ever do and it is even harder because it is so ordinary and it seems to go so slow.

“Our primary task as believers, and our best hope for lasting success, is to care for the individuals caught up in the pounding storm [of our particular and quickly passing culture]. They are trying to make sense of their lives with inadequate resources, confused and misled by the Evil One and unable to tell their left hand from their right (Jonah 4:11). They are not a united force; they are not even in solidarity with each other, apart from the unhappy solidarity of being

molded by the same junk food entertainment...Only from a spot of grounded safety can anyone discern what to approve and what to reject in the common culture.”²

If we doubt Christ’s welcome and his desire to use us, no matter how bad or helpless we feel, we need to remember our need to serve—always, and to be present to Jesus. We say, “Jesus, Master, look at all this trouble; look at all these these people. Here they are and they are so hungry! Can’t you **do** something?” And he looks right back at us and says, “*You give them something to eat.*”

And we say, “Are you kidding? Don’t you see what we’re up against? There isn’t a Super Center in the world that can feed all these hungers.” And he says, “What have you got at hand?”

And we say, “Gosh, just two pieces of that smoked Pacific salmon left over from the hors d’oeuvres, and, let’s see, five slices of that low-carb, seven grain bread from the health food store—and a little swish of Chardonnay.”

“Well,” he says, “bless your hearts, I always liked a party, too. It is enough. Bring it here to me.” And then he says, “Sit down.”

Well, we’re too busy, aren’t we? Or too ashamed. Or too anxious about what other people are saying or thinking. Or too worried or frightened. And who sits down for a meal together any more? Or who sits still for anything? But there it is. He says, “*Sit down.*” And he takes what we have at hand, calls our attention to heaven, blesses and breaks what we know to be insufficient and next thing you know we are picking up baskets full of “the broken pieces left over.”³

These are modest gestures—sitting down, looking up, blessing, breaking, giving—but they are, in Jesus’ hands, quite enough. In our life together we look to and seek to live by those simple gestures. But, as Father Emil always said from the pulpit of Lake Wobegone’s Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, “If you want to get hit by the train, you have to stand on the tracks.” In other words, you’ve got to show up!

In our life together we look to the wideness of God’s mercy. There is wideness there like the wideness of the sea. We know that in his mercy there is welcome for the sinner, that there is healing in Christ’s blood, and that God’s love is broader than the measure of our own minds.

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¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 61.

² Frederica Mathewes-Green, “Loving the Storm Drenched,” *Christianity Today*, March 2006, pp. 38-39.

³ Read Matthew 14: 17 and following for the real and fuller version.