

Psalm 138
Romans 16:1-16
“Everyone’s Can-do Holiday”

November 18, 2018
Rev. David Pierce

This past Monday I was driving along in my car listening to B101 on the radio when the voice of our own Bill George came over the airwaves inviting people to help the good folks at B101 fill up an entire bus with food for the hungry this Thanksgiving. In his promo, Bill indicated where you can bring your donations for drop-off. Honestly, my first thought was, “How cool is that? They’re going to fill a bus with cans of beans and boxes of instant mashed potatoes!” My second thought, though, was, “What? Who told them they could do that? That’s a job for the church!”

On Tuesday I got a message from a high school student at Cumberland High School who has taken the lead on a project at her school. The project is to organize her fellow students, as well as faculty and community members, to provide Christmas presents for 6 to 8 families in the Cumberland area who can otherwise not afford to buy Christmas this year, and she wanted to know if the church might be willing to help her out. My first thought was, “Yes, yes, and yes!” Because if the young want to reach for compassion, let the world lift them up so they can reach a little higher. My second thought, though, was, “We’re going to do that same thing at church. If I ask people to help you out, they might not help out the church.”

You see my dilemma. Or, depending upon how you look at it, maybe it’s not really a dilemma at all. On the one hand, why should it matter who makes the world better, so long as we do.

I have been an ordained minister of the Gospel for 12 years now. On the day I was ordained, I recall one of the clergy at the service laying their prayerful hands upon me, and including these words: “And may you always believe that God works as much beyond the church as God does within it.” Amen? Amen. When we the church gather never do we proclaim that we belong to the God of the Church alone. But always we say with the Psalmist: “The *earth* is the Lord’s and everything in it, the *world*, and all who live in it.” It’s a humbling reminder, even as we sit here calling upon God and doing our thing, that God might be out doing something else right now, for we alone are not God’s concern. “The

earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it." God has a good bit more to pay attention to than just what the church is up to. As one of the most familiar verses in all of literature puts it: "For God so loved the *world*, that God sent his only begotten son," and Jesus himself seemed to know it.

It's another humbling moment to realize that, based on the way the gospel writers portray him, Jesus was never liked much by his pastors and fellow church-goers, and that's because he wasn't much for doing things their way. Oh, he believed in community and even in tradition. He loved a good worship service, and probably wouldn't have minded even the occasional church meeting. But if you tried to tell him it was time to come inside for church when people were still standing in the breadline, he'd have something to say about it, and it wouldn't be pretty. Jesus was known for speaking in the tradition of the prophet Amos:

I cannot stand your religious meetings.

I want nothing to do with your catchy slogans and goals.

I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
your public relations and image making.

I've had all I can take of your noisemaking that makes no difference.

Do you know what I want?

I want justice—oceans of it.

I want fairness—rivers of it.

That's what I want. That's *all* I want.

In his prized novel *Jayber Crow*, Wendell Berry writes:

"As I have read the Gospels over the years, the belief has grown in me that Christ did not come to found an organized religion but came instead to found an unorganized one. He seems to have come to carry religion out of the temples into the fields and sheep pastures, onto the roadsides and the banks of the rivers, into the houses of sinners and publicans, into the town and the wilderness, toward the membership of all that is here."

So why should we care, why should I care, who feeds the hungry and buys the children gifts at Christmas? What does it matter whether it is the church or is not the church who makes it happen, so long as it happens? Now you know I'm going to say it doesn't matter, because that's what my mother—well, my mother and Jesus—would tell me I'm supposed to say. But can I confess something to you? It does matter to me. Maybe it's my ego talking, telling me that it would feel pretty good to be able to tell people, "Hey, did you hear what my church did?" Or maybe it's the fact that we have our Annual Meeting today and not everything feels like it's right where I'd like it to be. We have an exciting budget planned for 2019, a budget that represents new ideas and fresh growth, but our pledges aren't quite a match for that budget yet. And we have some important leadership roles that need filling still. And right or wrong, now is the time when every pastor wants to know that everyone is on board. And if everyone would just bring all their Thanksgiving food donations and Christmas gift donations here and not somewhere else, well, that would just go to show how much you love me. I mean, how much you love the church. I mean, just how much you love.

So, you see my dilemma. If we believe God works as much beyond the church as within it (and I do); if we say that God is love and love is God and God can't be contained by any church because God so loved the *world*; and if we know, as I think we do, that there are a lot of things we can get from being part of a church that we can get just as well, if not better, by being part of the YMCA or the Rotary Club or your local high school track team, then we have to ask ourselves: why the church at all? What do we get out of coming here that can't be found anywhere else? Cause we know we're not the only ones collecting food. And we're not the only ones building community or talking about the love of neighbor. Nor are we the only place where one can look for God and be found by God in return. "The whole earth is the Lord's and everything in it." What is more, I know of people who stopped coming to church because when they came, they couldn't find God here, or because they got burned out from feeling like the church just wanted their volunteer hours, or because when they offered to volunteer, someone told them, no thanks, we already have enough, so they said, what's the point? Why bother with church at all?

I think it's a fair question, and one that I can only assume—in being here today—you have asked yourself. I'd love to hear your answers, and maybe one of these weeks I'll ask

you to come up here and take the microphone. Or you could meet me for a cup of coffee and a slice of pie at Phantom Farms. You can probably tell, I've been thinking long and hard about it all week, ever since I heard about B101's food bus and ever since getting the call to help a high school student collect Christmas gifts, and here's my answer. I've written it down in several parts, but it's a short answer.

First, in the church we do not ask whether people belong. We assume it. Unlike a lot of groups and organizations out there, where you might have to try and figure out whether you can fit in, the whole purpose of the church of Jesus Christ is to make room for the puzzle pieces that don't fit in quite right. This is what the Apostle Paul is trying to show us in the final chapter of his letter to the church at Rome. He's writing out a list of names. In no other part of the world would these names go together. Epaphroditus from Asia, Prisca and Aquila from the land of Gentiles, and Herodian and Narcissus from the land of Greece. And Rufus and Rufus's mother, whom Paul says was like a mother to him. Nowhere else would we find all these names side-by-side, except here we do, because Paul is writing to his church and to a group of people who have put belonging before everything else.

Second, and related to the first, we are not just a random collection of folks. I do not come here each week just to see who else might show up. Believe it or not, I come each week in specific search of you. Like Paul, I have a list and your name is on it. When I come, I come looking for you, and when I see you, I delight in what I see. And when you're not here, I wonder where you are, and I think about you.

The third reason I bother with church is for what I call the unconditional nature of it all. I don't know too many places where you can be called a member without having to pay for the privilege of it, but here membership is free. And I don't know too many places where you can be gone for weeks, months, years at a time, and people will leave the door open for you the whole time. And then like the Prodigal, they'll run to welcome you back. And I don't know too many places that live by the rule: there is no such thing as too much forgiveness. It's the unconditional nature of love and mercy that makes church like a fairy tale come true.

Fourth, what brings me back to church is the hope I have in knowing that God is at work beyond the church. That it doesn't all come down to us. Which is good, because if the world were mine to save, we'd all be in a lot of trouble. The good news is: the gospel tells

us that we've already been saved. We've been saved by the love of a God who gave us Jesus, Jesus who looked out upon us from where we hung him on a cross and said still, what's not to love?