

Rethinking the Church

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on First Peter 2: 2-10

Delivered on May 14, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

Well, this week's sermon is a little like last week's, because last week, I told you a story about the first church where I was a pastor. This week, I have another story about that church. At that church there was a woman I'll call Helen. Helen did everything at the church. She was an elder, deacon, clerk of Session for a while, she taught Sunday school. She was there every Sunday. Helen's husband was a man I'll call Paul, but unlike Helen, for a long time, I never saw Paul. The only thing I ever knew about Paul was in the stories Helen told me. I didn't even know what he looked like. Well, one day in the church we decided we were going to build a Habitat for Humanity home for a family that lived in substandard housing. So one day we all got out to this plot of land with our hammers and saws and lumber, and lo and behold, here came Paul. Now, Paul had worked in construction for about thirty years and he just plain took over. The entire church came out to help but we all knew better than to get in Paul's way. He practically built the entire house himself. In the midst of watching Paul work, at one point I turned to Helen and said something like "He's amazing." Helen said "That's why I love him" or words to that effect. But she then thought it was necessary to add these words, "Paul is here because he is happy to help out with the things our church does in any way he can. But he doesn't come to church because he doesn't need anything from anybody." Well, if I had a dime for every time I forgot to say something to someone that I should have said, I would be a millionaire. What I should have said then was "Why don't you tell Paul that *we* need *him*." Because I don't think that would have ever occurred to someone like Paul.

Now, I of course did not know Paul well, and so I would hesitate to attribute any view to him based on what his wife Helen told me. But if Helen was right about him, then it seems to me that Paul's view of the church is one that I sometimes call the Therapeutic view of the Church. When I feel weak, I will come to the church. When I feel especially distraught I will come to church. Otherwise why go? Well, I have a couple of things to say about the Therapeutic view of the church. First, I wonder if this therapeutic view of the church is not why in the church there is what you might call a gender gap. Among American adults who attend church, these days only 39 percent of them are men and of course that means that 61 percent are women. Why do so few men go to church? I suspect that it is partly because of this therapeutic view of the church. It isn't macho to go to church because church is for the weak, not the strong. It is for those who have problems. Now, I don't know this for a fact, but I also suspect that those who have this therapeutic view of the church will also have a pastor centered view of the church. By that, what I mean is that according to their view, the church really is just the pastor. It is or should be an extension of the pastor's personality, his or her persona. You go to church for therapy and the pastor is the therapist. And you bear no more of a relationship to the other members of the church than you bear to the other people in the waiting room who are waiting to see a therapist.

Well, one thing I have learned over the years is that while some beliefs are completely false, most false beliefs are never completely false, there is at least a grain of truth in them. And there is at least a grain of truth in this therapeutic view of the church. Often we come to church in times of weakness and we come looking for emotional healing and the person who is the pastor should be someone who has at least some skills in being able to facilitate that healing.

And it is also important to note that as Christians we need certain things from God whether we recognize those needs or not. We have our prayer of confession each Sunday because we have things to be forgiven for, even if we don't *believe* we have things to be forgiven for. But this view is also I think, the exact opposite of the view of the church we get today in first Peter. In the image we get from first Peter, the author talks about the church as a building. Now, in some ways that is an unfortunate image because all too often we think about the church as a building, we think about the church as a place that we go to, not as something we belong to, or as something that we are. But if you read closely, I think it becomes quite clear that the point of using this image is not to say that the church is a place that we visit or a place that we go to, but it is to say that just like a building needs lots of stones for its construction we are all like stones in the church. And just like these building block stones, on our own, we can do nothing, but when we are together we can construct the most useful and the most glorious of buildings with Christ as our foundation, with Christ as our cornerstone. Think about the ancient structures, the ancient constructions of the Roman empire, or ancient Egypt some of which still stand today, the Colosseum and the aqueducts, the pyramids in Giza, these structures which have survived thousands of years of wind and rain and shifting grounds. They are amazing, and they are pieced together with nothing more than stones. They are so amazing there is simply no way you can go visit these structures and look at them with your own eyes and not have your breath taken away. You can't do it. When you consider that these ancient civilizations had no internet, no t.v. no cell phones, that had nothing that we would recognize as modern or even pre-modern technology, and yet they constructed these amazing buildings that have stood for thousands of years it simply takes your breath away. But when it comes to the stones that are

used to construct these buildings, what are they by themselves. What are they when they are on their own? They are nothing. So for the author of first Peter, I suppose if you come to church because you want your needs met, that's fine. But it is important to bear in mind that the church also need you. Now, you might say to me, Rich, that's a nice thought to say the church needs me, but I don't see how that can be. You know I'm not the pastor like you, I'm not the organist like Cindy, I am not the choir director like Tina. Well, fine, do you pray? Do you sing? Can you offer words of encouragement? You will never know how important these things are. Even if you do nothing else, you have no idea how important these things are.

You know, my mother is here today. And I guess for Mother's Day, I will tell this story. I have told you before that when I was growing up, we went to church every Sunday and so I have lots of stories about going to church as a child, and I remember one Sunday when we were going to church, I had some song to sing in the children's choir. I don't remember how old I was, I guess I was about seven or so. And we had some song to sing, I don't remember what it was, but I hated the song. And I said "Mom, I don't want to go up and sing this song. Why do I need to do this?" you know how a seven year old kid does if you've ever had children. Well, my mother could have said "Son, you're going to sing whether you like it or not," and she may have said that, I don't remember, but she also told me how important it was that I do this, because she said there are a lot of older people in the church who don't feel well, and have a really hard time getting out of bed in the morning and getting up and moving, and it isn't so easy for them to come to church on a Sunday morning, but they come, and the reason they come to church is to hear children like me sing.

Now, why do I remember a story like that? I don't know. But I think it is because at an early age it impressed upon me that even as a small person, even as someone who could barely tie his own shoes and tuck his shirt in, that I was important to the church, that I and people like me did something for people, I got them out of bed in the morning. The church could not be the church without me. The church could not be the church without me and people like me.

Well, just as the church is more than a building, it is also more than just Sunday worship, the church, ultimately is a people, as I've said. But if you do not believe that your presence here matters on Sunday morning, then maybe you should try something. Maybe you should try living in isolation from other people. Total isolation. And by living in total isolation, to be clear, I do not mean spending time in solitude. People sometimes ask me what I do on my day off. You know what I do, I'll tell you one of the things I do. A lot of nothing. I enjoy quiet. I sit alone without the annoying din of the t.v. in the background, without anyone talking, when it's just me and God and yes, the dog sitting on the couch together in pure quiet. Moments of solitude are great, but that's not what I mean. What I mean is living without any friends, without any family, without any meaningful relationships at all. There is a reason that solitary confinement is one of the worst ways to punish somebody in prison.

If you have ever lived in total isolation like that, you will understand why church matters so much. You will understand why there simply is no belonging to God without belonging to each other. You cannot belong to God and tell your neighbor I don't want to have anything to do with you. You cannot belong to God and tell your family I do not want to have anything to do with you. You cannot belong to God and say to the rest of the world, I do not want to have anything to do with you.

The other day I was trying to count up the number of sermons I have preached ever since the first sermon I preached ever, and I think it is somewhere in the neighborhood of 400 to 450. My average sermon is also about 2000 words, so if you do the math, that comes to somewhere between 800 and 900 thousand words I have used to talk about the gospel in my career of preaching. That is almost a million words. That's a lot of hot air. As Christians and particularly as Reformed Christians, we believe that words are important when it comes to communicating the truth of the gospel. But we also believe in symbols to communicate the gospel because there are some things which we believe are simply beyond words. And I think it is important that one of our most central symbols is a table. We could have all kinds of symbols couldn't we? We don't have to have a table. We could have a cubicle, we could have a set of headphones, we could have a telephone. We could have all kinds of things that symbolize shutting others out and having a one way conversation with God. But we don't. We have a table that symbolizes coming together. Belonging together, because even in our symbols that need no words, we say we cannot belong to God without belonging to each other. Think about that. Think about that.