

A Word from our General Presbyter

Ed Thompson

Recently, a friend of mine posted on Facebook, “I really wish I enjoyed basketball. As much as I love watching my friends’ excitement, I’m always sad that much of March is a mystery to me.”

I can’t say that I was appalled. But I was certainly surprised. Who doesn’t love March Madness? Yes, I was frustrated that Duke, Louisville and Villanova all lost before the Sweet Sixteen, especially since I thought Duke was going to run the table. It galls me that I end up rooting for North Carolina to win, even though I dislike the Tar Heels. It annoys me that Kansas might actually take home another National Championship. As a Penn State fan, I am disappointed that I usually end up having to pick against teams from the Big Ten because it’s such a weak basketball league.

This is all balanced, though, by my delight in West Virginia making it past the first weekend of the tournament, seeing the excitement of the players and fans from South Carolina after they upset Duke and being amused by the guy with the funny beard who plays for Gonzaga.

In the long run, I realize that March Madness doesn’t really matter. After a week or so, I’ll probably have a hard time remembering who even won the title. I suppose, at best, you can say that all this simply provides a welcome distraction from reading and hearing about the antics of our state legislature, Congress and the president.

I started to think about how you might convince someone that March Madness was fun, that this was something to pay attention to, that this was something that they might really enjoy.

Then it occurred to me that there are probably more parallels to life in the church than I would like to admit. If you replace “basketball” with “church” and “March” with “what they do on Sunday morning,” you end up with the statement, “I really wish I enjoyed church. As much as I love watching my friends’ excitement, I’m always sad that much of what they do on Sunday morning is a mystery to me.”

Ouch. How do you help someone connect with the church? Or more importantly, how do you help them come to know Jesus? What seems natural, important, life-giving to us is – whether we like it or not – a mystery to others.

Part of me wants to say, “Just invite them to church” or “Invite them to come to Bible study.” It’s biblical. In the first chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the disciples of John the Baptist and Philip tells Nathanael, “Come and see.”

Yet I can easily imagine someone who follows through on that invitation being confused by the lingo we typically put in our church bulletins. I can see them not being comfortable with using a hymn book or singing outside of a shower. And, unfortunately, I think for a lot of people, except perhaps for those who regularly (I almost said religiously) listen to National Public Radio, organ music will just seem odd.

I hate to say this. It’s what I know and love. A Sunday without worship seems empty and feels strange. I suspect for some, and perhaps for many, though, going to worship on Sunday feels strange and seems like an imposition, if not a waste of time.

So what do we do? I think it starts with prayer. I think we need to engage people in conversation about what we believe, what gives us hope and why we value attending worship and being part of a church. And maybe before we invite someone to join us for worship or Bible study, we invite them to join us in a mission or service project.

I don’t know whether more people will attend worship or watch the NCAA basketball tournament. Nor do I know whether more people are turned off by church or by basketball. But I think it does matter. Whether we realize it or not, we can’t assume everyone shares our values or likes what we like about sports or about the church.

I shouldn't have been too surprised my friend isn't a basketball fan. Maybe we shouldn't be surprised if our friends don't attend worship or belong to a church. But maybe we should find the courage to talk to them about that. I find it fun to follow March Madness and talk about the brackets with my friends, but what's really more important?