

Building a Church

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

Delivered on May 10, 2020

One day, years ago, a man I'll call Ray joined the church where I was the pastor. Whether he joined by reaffirmation of faith or transfer of membership, I don't recall, but he joined and then after he joined I didn't see him for about a month. So I called him up on the phone, hello. Ray, pastor Rich here, we haven't seen you in a while, is everything ok. Oh yes, preacher everything's ok. Ok, well, we miss seeing you. So Ray came back to church for one, two, maybe three weeks. But he wasn't around at our fellowship events, he wasn't at Sunday school or at anything else we did. And finally he wasn't even around on Sunday morning. So a few more weeks went by and I called him up again. And we went through the same conversation I had before. And once again Ray came back. But again he was only there for a couple of weeks and then he disappeared. So I finally said to myself, you know what I'm not going to go through this same song and dance again. This time I'm going to pay Ray a visit. So I did. I knocked on Ray's door and I ended up sitting down with him and I finally said Ray I want you to be honest with me. Why is it that I have to keep reminding you to come to church? Do you no longer believe the things that we believe? Do you no longer believe in God or Jesus Christ? Oh no, no. It wasn't that. Ok. Well, do you have a problem with someone in the church? You know sometimes a person will go to church for a while and then end up having a falling out with someone and so one of them stops going. Is it something like that? Oh no. No, it wasn't that either. But finally Ray said Rich, you see, I just don't see where I have any need for church in my own life. I just don't need the church. Now Ray didn't mean that our church didn't meet his needs and some other church would meet his needs better. It's not that he didn't think we weren't meeting his

needs. Ray just didn't think he had any needs that our church or any church needed to meet and that is why he didn't go.

Ray's view of the church is one that I like to call the Therapeutic view of the Church. When I feel weak, I will come to the church. When I feel distraught I will come to church. When I feel lonely I will come to church. Otherwise why go? Well, this morning I have a couple of things to say about this therapeutic view. 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. And second, while I don't know this for a fact, I 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 in life and that you probably have too 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. For example, if this were an ordinary service of worship in a more ordinary time, we would have a prayer of confession because we have things to be forgiven for, even if we don't *believe* we have things to be forgiven for. But this therapeutic view is also I think, the exact opposite of the view of the church we get today in our New Testament lesson. 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 too many people think about the church as only being a building, as being only 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 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. When you consider that these ancient civilizations had no bulldozers or jackhammers or cranes or anything that we would recognize as modern equipment 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 on the Session. I'm not the organist like Cindy or Stephen, I am not the choir director like Bob or Tina. Well, fine, do you pray? Do you sing? Can you offer words of encouragement? You will never know how important these things are for some people. Maybe now that we are living in physical separation from each other some of us have learned how important these things are. Even if you do nothing else, don't ever think you're not needed, don't ever think you don't have any gifts to give.

I remember when I was in ninth grade, I had as my economics teacher the high school football coach, coach Brown. Well, one day coach Brown gave us some economics homework which I thought was about as exciting as reading the dictionary, and so I didn't do it. Well, the next day we were going over the homework in class and like a typical football coach you know coach Brown would call everyone by their last name. So he would say Smith what's your answer for number one, Jones what's your answer for number two, you know how that goes. Well, finally he got around to me, and he said Holmes what's your answer for number ten. "I didn't do the homework." I mumbled. "I beg your pardon. Speak up please, Holmes." "I didn't do the assignment." I said. Well, he glared at me over his bifocals "You didn't do the assignment?" and I'll never forget what he said next. "Holmes, is this your answer to life?"

Is that my answer to life? I thought he just wanted an answer to number 10. As a fourteen year old kid who knew little more than how much he hated homework. I had no idea what the

coach meant by an answer to life. But you know what he meant. He meant what is it that you want out of life? That's a question that all of us face from time to time. What do we want out of life? And of course, we want certain things. We may want a nice house, or a nice car, we want a spouse and children. But it has probably occurred to most of us at least once that we want more than just things and relationships out of life, most of us also want our lives to have meaning. Most of us don't want to get to the end of our days and say you know what, I got everything out of life that I ever wanted, but what was that all about. Why did it matter that I lived. And I don't know that I can tell you exactly what a meaningful life looks like, because people have all kinds of ways of living, or life-styles as we call them. There are probably as many life styles in this world as there are people who are alive. But I think I can tell you what a meaningless life looks like. I think I can tell you what a life devoid of meaning looks like. If you have ever read your ancient Greek mythology you may remember myth of Sisyphus. And if you do, you know that Sisyphus was punished by having to roll a large stone up a hill only to have it roll back down again, and he would have to push it up over and over again for all it eternity only to have it roll back down, over and over again. Now we can all recognize this as a terrible punishment, but what makes it so terrible. Well, of course if the stone is large enough and the hill is steep enough, the work is hard, it is physically exhausting work to push a stone up a hill. It is boring work. It's hard to imagine something that could be more boring, in fact. But more than being boring and hard, it is also a meaningless work. It is, in fact, completely meaningless. Because the stone just goes up and down the hill for all eternity, Sisyphus never accomplishes anything. Now, like most people I prefer easier work to harder work. Who doesn't? And like most people I prefer interesting work to boring work. But I don't mind boring and difficult work

so long as I know I'm getting somewhere with it, so long as I know that I'm accomplishing something. And so if Sisyphus were to push a stone up a hill and he could use it to construct some bridge or some building, his work wouldn't be so bad. His work wouldn't be so bad if he were accomplishing something, if he were contributing to something.

I cannot promise you, I cannot promise you that becoming involved in a church like Northminster or Calvary will immediately cause you to say suddenly my life is filled with meaning. I cannot promise that and in fact no one has ever said that to me. But what I can promise is that you will never say your life is meaningless because of your involvement in this church. And I can promise you something else as well. You may hear people say I don't need to go to church because I don't need anything from them, but you will never find a meaningful life from a church that only meets your needs. We will only ever contribute to the meaning of your life by letting one of those stones come together to build up the church, to build up the church with Christ as the chief cornerstone.