

COME TOGETHER

Sermon for Pentecost 25B—Heb. 10:11-25, Mk 13:1-8

LPC, 11/15/15

Who here is familiar with the acronym SBNR? This is a term that is turning up more and more in demographic surveys, and by some reports is the fastest-growing category in surveys about religious affiliation. SBNR stands for “spiritual but not religious.” More and more people these days, apparently, self-identify as “spiritual but not religious”. Obviously this means that these people do not identify with any particular religious institution. Beyond that, SBNR doesn’t seem to mean much of anything.

In order to be completely fair, in the manner of NBC giving equal time to the other GOP presidential candidates after featuring Donald Trump as the host of Saturday Night Live, I really ought to have someone up here who identifies as SBNR to answer my arguments. But I don’t, and if you happen to be SBNR yourself, having wandered into this particular church institution unwittingly or unwillingly, I invite you to quietly identify yourself to me after church so we can have a conversation which hopefully would be enlightening to us both.

In the meantime, one of the perks of having a pulpit is using it. Whether or not I actually speak from the pulpit, I choose today to exercise my pulpit rights and explain why, from my perspective, “spiritual but not religious” is a virtually meaningless term.

It would appear that people of the SBNR persuasion are claiming some kind of moral ground in identifying as spiritual. But what does that mean? All human beings are spiritual. We are enfleshed creatures, obviously. We do not exist, in this life anyway, separately from our bodies.

But we are also inspirited people. We not exist, in this or any life, separately from our spirits. To say you are a spiritual person is like saying you are a person who breathes air or eats food. To say you are a spiritual person is like saying you are a mammal. To be spiritual really connotes no kind of distinction at all among human beings.

Now, of course what people do with their status as spiritual beings varies from person to person. To my mind, the fallacy of “spiritual not religious” is that without a higher authority to refer to in spiritual and moral matters, the arbiter of goodness must be oneself. In effect, the “spiritual but not religious” person casts God in his or her own image. The SBNR person sets himself or herself up in the position of final judge of truth. In short, they make themselves God.

Over and against the self-reliant, self-referential SBNR, we have the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, whose reference is Jesus, our great high priest, whose authority is established not only by his presence in the godhead, but by his having been an enfleshed, inspirited creature just like us.

This passage actually concludes with a beautiful justification for corporate, rather than purely individual spirituality: “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Do not neglect to meet together. This is an excellent text for a day when a parish holds its annual congregational meeting. You all have responded to this call to meet together, so there's no need for me to preach to the obviously converted. What I'd like to explore for the remainder of this sermon is why we should take this directive to heart and not neglect to meet together throughout the year.

I have spent the last many months talking in depth with some of you, and reading your interviews, about your relationship with this church. It's obvious that many of you come to this church out of some perceived need. Lawrencefield meets this need in some respect, whether as a place to see friends, or find peace, or connect with ancient familiar rituals, or possibly even to worship and pray.

It's assumed that when people stop coming to church it's because church no longer meets their needs. Several years ago the phrase involved "feeding." If you stopped going to church, or to a particular church, you would say something like, "It just doesn't feed me anymore."

Now it's a sorry, sorry thing when church doesn't feed people anymore. Churches are supposed to feed people. It's one way we follow Jesus, doing what Jesus did. We are called to feed the physically hungry, and we are called to feed the spiritually hungry. We offer physical food to meet physical hunger, and we offer Jesus to meet spiritual hunger

What I'd like to suggest, based on the Letter to the Hebrews, is that having your needs met is not the only reason to come to church. The very phrasing Hebrews uses suggests why. Hebrews does not say, "Do not neglect to go to church, or temple, or worship." Hebrews says, "Do not neglect to come together." There is value, immeasurable value, in the Body of Christ coming together as a body.

If you need church, well and good. We're here for you. But also consider that church needs you. The Body of Christ needs all its members. Hebrews lists a couple of ways we need each other. Together we can provoke one another to love and good deeds. We can encourage one another. By your very presence you encourage others. You say, "This is important. This is worth my time." There's also the chance that it's your handshake, your eye contact, your word of encouragement that strengthens another's faith and vocation. Do not underestimate your importance to church. Church is definitely a case of "Together, we're better."

The Letter to the Hebrews adds a note of urgency to this directive to meet together. The Day of the Lord is approaching. The Hebrews themselves understood the Day of the Lord to be the Apocalypse predicted by Jesus in Mark's Gospel, and described in the book of Daniel.

Though the Apocalypse can be understood as the end-of-the-world cataclysm by which God puts all things to rights, what the reference to the Apocalypse does effectively is heighten the importance of our actions in the here and now. There is something to this idea of living each day as if it might be your last. Many of us know the sorrow of deferring attention to a relationship until it's too late: someone we love dies before we can say, "I'm sorry," or "I love you." This is true of institutions too. If you don't maintain your relationship with church, one day it may not be here.

If Christianity means anything, it means tending to your relationships now: with God and with one another. We must not act as if we have plenty of time to do this later because we may not. For this reason, if for no other, let us not neglect to come together. Ever.