9-18-16 Springboro First UMC Confirmation Sunday

John 15:1-5, Psalm 111 Rev. Amy Haines

Participating in Our Ministries: Participating by Our Presence

There once was a church member who allegedly wrote the following note to their pastor at the New Year:

..Dear Pastor:

You often stress attendance at worship as being very important for a Christian, but I think a person has a right to miss now and then. I think every person ought to be excused for the following reasons and the number of times indicated.

Christmas Holidays 2 (the Sunday before & after)

New Years 1 (the party lasted too long)

Easter 2 (get away for the holidays)

July 4th 1 (national holiday)

Labor Day 2 (need to get away)

Memorial Day 1 (visit hometown folk)

School closing 1 (kids need a break)

School reopens 1 (one last fling)

Family reunions 3 (mine & wife’s)

Sleep late 9 (stayed up too long Saturday night)

Deaths in family 2

Anniversary 1 (second honeymoon)

Sickness 5 (one per family member)

Business trip 1 (a must)

Vacation 6 (three to four weeks)

Bad weather 2 (ice, snow, rain, clouds)

Ball games 2

Races 2

Unexpected company 2 (can’t walk out)

Time changes 2 (spring & fall)

Special on TV 3 (superbowl and such)

Pastor, that leaves two Sundays per year. So, you can count on us to be in church on the 4th Sunday in February and the 3rd Sunday in August unless we are providentially hindered.

Sincerely,

A Faithful Member

-sermoncentral.com/illustrations

I know that there are other places you could be this weekend. Watching football. Sleeping in. Out with friends. Gathered with family. Yet you have chosen to be present with the body of Christ in worship and fellowship this third weekend of September. Thank you.

(9:15) Thank you to so many family members, youth classes, and friends who have gathered for worship to support our confirmands today as they pledge their commitment to Christ and Christ’s church, lived out here and now at Springboro First.

This weekend we are on Week 2 of a 5 part series that looks in depth at our sixth vow of membership, taken by the youth this weekend, which asks: Will you faithfully participate in the ministries of the United Methodist Church by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness?

I chose this series because of Confirmation being this weekend.

Yet this vow is a call to all Christians, whether or not you are a member here or in another congregation, a call to commit to follow Christ by taking part in the ministries of the church—local and universal—in five specific ways in a specific context at a specific time.

Last week, we heard Christ’s call to participate by our prayers. Today, Christ calls us to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our presence.

Hebrews 10:24-25 proclaims:

“And let us consider each other carefully for the purpose of sparking love and good deeds. Don’t stop meeting together with other believers, which some people have gotten into the habit of doing. Instead, encourage each other, especially as you see the day drawing near.”

We are called by the Scriptures to meet together with other believers, to be regularly and intentionally present with one another in worship and fellowship, in study and in service. We are called to be present with one another not to bring each other down, but rather to uplift one another. To remember who and whose we are, and to be strengthened to live by faith in the week ahead.

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

we are more than just a body in a pew

we are more than a number on a stat sheet

we are more than fresh blood for committees

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

We are not here to convey social standing in the community

We are not here to say we are better than anyone else

We are not here as part of a divine checklist

that determines how we earn our way into heaven

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

we declare our place among God’s covenant people.

Mark Stamm proclaims,

The mystery of the Risen Christ is present in the midst of my sisters and brothers. They hear my confession and proclaim God’s forgiveness. They embrace me, they laugh and cry with me, and God heals me in and through all of that. My brothers and sisters know my shortcomings, and so they keep me honest, but they also know my potential, and so they call forth my gifts. They share their heritage and their wisdom and give me people to teach. I need their commitment to me, and they need me as well.

-Mark Stamm Our Membership Vows in the UMC gbod 2013

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

 we display our commitment to Christ through claiming our place in the church.

.. A little old man was seen every Sunday morning walking to church. He was deaf, so he could not hear a word of the sermon or the music of the choir, or the hymns sung by the congregation.

A scoffer asked, "Why do you spend your Sundays in that church when you can’t hear a word?"

He replied, "I want my neighbors to know which side I’m on!"

-Jason Cole “Is Church Attendance Necessary?” 2-05 sermoncentral.com

When we participate in the ministries of the church by our presence

 we seek the presence of the risen Christ in our midst.

As Jesus has promised, “...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). Where the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, where faith is spoken and sung, where the bread is broken and the cup lifted up, Jesus is there.

Now, God loves us no matter where we find ourselves on a Sunday morning or a Wednesday evening or a Tuesday morning. Yet God loves us too much to leave us where we are now on our journeys with Jesus.

Rather, God calls us to grow deeper as disciples, to grow more like Christ, each and every day of our lives. And that kind of growth happens best in the midst of the presence of the gathered Christian community.

Is the community of faith, the church, perfect? By no means. Will we never be hurt by the words of someone else in the church? Most likely not. Will we always agree with every decision made the church leadership or every word spoken by or the pastor? No.

Still God calls us to be present with one another. Still God calls us to be the church in this world, with a message of good news to live and to share.

In worship, in Sunday School and other studies, in youth group or small groups, in teams and committees we are still called to a ministry of presence with God and with one another.

I would not be here before you today if it wasn’t for the presence of the family of God at First Church Middletown. They nurtured me and challenged me. They loved me and forgave me. They taught me to sing, and taught me to pray. They taught me to love God and taught me to love neighbor. While I do not remember every sermon, every lesson, and even every person that nurtured me along my journey of faith, I do know that every step of the way I was surrounded by a ministry of presence—God’s presence with me, as well as the presence of the members of that church body.

How are we here at Springboro First being the presence of God to one another, to every Bright Beginnings student and family, and to the community of Springboro we don’t yet know? How are we living out our faith in Jesus through a ministry of presence?

In our Gospel lesson today Jesus proclaimed to his disciples on their last night together,

“I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,

because apart from me you can do nothing.”

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Abide--it sounds like such an old-fashioned biblical word. What does it mean to abide in Jesus?

To abide in Jesus means we are to live in, make a home in, and mutually dwell in a relationship with Jesus. To abide means we are to stay connected to Jesus in the long run. No matter what tragedies or triumphs we face in life, no matter what other relationships spring up and fade away, to abide in Jesus means that we will never be alone, for he is with us and we are with him.

And when we abide in Jesus and he in us, together we can bear much fruit that glorifies God.

Jesus also says,

“I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower.

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

Notice that in this passage, *every* branch attached to the vine gets cultivated in one of two ways—removed or pruned. Pastor Bruce Wilkinson in his book *Secrets of the Vine* argues that “cut off” or “remove” are incorrect translations of the Greek word *airo*, which would be better translated as “take up” or “lift up.”

In his book Wilkinson shares,

At a pastor’s conference on the West Coast, ...a sun-browned man came up to me and asked, “Do you understand John 15?” “Not completely,” I answered. “Why?” “I own a large vineyard in northern California,” he said, “and I think I have it figured out.” I offered to buy him coffee on the spot.

As we sat across the restaurant table from each other, he began to talk about the life of a grower—the long hours spent walking the vineyards, tending the grapes, watching the fruit develop, waiting for the perfect day to begin harvest.

“New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground,” he explained. “But they don’t bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed. The branch becomes sick and useless.” “What do you do? I asked. “Cut it off and throw it away?” “Oh, no!” he exclaimed. “The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water for those branches. We lift them up and wash them off.” He demonstrated for me with dark, calloused hands. “Then we wrap them around the trellis or tie them up. Pretty soon they’re thriving.”

 --Bruce Wilkinson, Secrets of the Vine, p. 33-35

If we are in Jesus, we are too valuable for God to give up on us. So God will seek to lift us up, clean us up and care for us to coax us to yield good fruit. And if we are already yielding good fruit for the kingdom of God, God seeks to prune us to bear more fruit. Even when life is great and ministries are thriving, God continues to look for ways to prune us into more effective Christian servant leaders.

It is only those branches not abiding in the vine that are thrown away and withered; all others will be pruned, will be disciplined, will be lifted up, cleansed, and refocused so to concentrate on producing fruit for the kingdom of God.

When we are never apart from the vine, we are also never apart from the other branches. When we abide in Jesus we also abide in each other. It is a ministry of presence, to share in another’s experience, to grow together, to nourish and strengthen and support one another.

We become connected through our baptisms, and we remain connected as we commit to following Jesus and being a part of Christ’s church. To follow Jesus Christ is to be a part of the Body of Christ, joined with other Christians in worship and service, fellowship and accountability.

Keep in mind Paul’s great image of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12 which says

“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.” “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (12, 27)

As one author wrote, echoing Paul’s words: “We cannot grow to spiritual maturity in isolation.

We were designed to grow in community.”

--Leadership from the Heart Participant Book p.30

This connection is not meant to hinder our growth or to clip our wings. Instead, our connection to Jesus and through Jesus to one another is meant to give us room to grow and mentors and friends who will encourage us in our growth as we each seek to make our mark on this world, however big or small.

Look around you—all those who are seated around you should be supporting your growth in healthy ways, nurturing you in life and in faith. Remember those who are no longer with us yet nurtured our faith. As you grow and live and give to others, remember that you do not walk the hills and valleys of life alone; you do not face the fires and calm waters of life with no support. You are connected to Jesus. You are connected to one another. You are connected to other men and women of faith.

And on God’s vine there are no branches labeled Catholic and Baptist and United Methodist and Presbyterian. There are no branches labeled by the color of our skin or the country on our passport. There are no branches labeled or differing ways we live out God’s kingdom here on earth. All branches are connected to the same vine. And in doing so all branches will co-mingle with other branches, regardless of whether or not they like each other and welcome each other.

When we are connected with Jesus, we are connected with one another in the body of Christ, and together we can show the world a different way of living, a way of hope, love, generosity and joy.

So how are you participating by your presence at worship and study, at fellowship and service? Do you struggle with consistent worship attendance due to work or sports schedules, vacation or grandkids, lack of trust or lack of relevancy?

Yes, I have heard the excuses as to why Christians no longer gather for worship, or cannot participate in a study, or cannot be around other members in the local congregation.

.. Willow Creek Community Church once asked the question: if you don't go to church, why? The five biggest reasons: 1) Boring, 2) Irrelevant, 3) Asking for money all the time, 4) I'm too busy already, 5) I feel awkward at church.

--Willow Creek Community Church. Sermonillustrations.com:church attendance

I have seen the research that millenials, especially, find church hypocritical, irrelevant, and fake.

Yes, there are times all of the above are true. The church is not perfect. We cannot meet everyone’s personal preferences for worship and music style. At times we all feel awkward at church.

Yet remember Christ’s call today that as we are connected to the vine, we are connected to one another. That connection includes our presence, our active participation in the local congregation, to the best of our abilities.

Imagine if you invited a neighbor to church, and on the one Sunday they decide to show up, you were not there. How does your presence in worship make a difference to a newcomer? Imagine if we were to all call in sick on the same day we were to be in mission out in the community. What kind of an impact does our presence have in this community? Consider how often your family reads the Bible together at home and discusses the Word’s impact in our lives. How does our study of God’s word together here at church, as children, youth and adults, nurture our faith lives? Consider the many ways we support one another in times of crisis and in joy, from Stephen Ministries to Meals to prayers and hugs. How does our presence in one another’s lives share the grace and love of Christ?

Participating in the church by our presence matters. How you participate may be different than the person sitting in front of you. How you participate may differ depending on the season of life you find yourself in now.

While gathering for worship is still primary, there are many ways to be present with and for one another. This week I encourage you to name the ways you participate through the ministry of presence, and consider one way to be more present with the community of faith.

Jesus says to us,

“I am the vine, you are the branches.”

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

May we go forth today abiding in Jesus, and abiding with one another. May we go forth today thankful for the community of faith that surrounds us, and thankful for our place in that community of faith. May we go forth today living into the ways where we are faithfully participating by our presence.

May it be so. Let us pray.