

***“We’re Only Fooling Ourselves:
You Can Be Religious & Not Go to Church!”***

***Matthew 18:18-20
June 27, 2010***

***Acts 2:43-47
St. James UCC***

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In the United States of America we believe that religion is a matter of personal choice. Each person chooses to be or not to be religious. Each person also chooses how they will be religious. Being religious is not a part of our citizenship, nor a legal requirement for employment or social status. It is a matter of faith.

Our religion is also personal. We often talk about our needing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, a relationship in which we experience God’s love for us in very intimate ways. That personal experience of God is an important one. We need the ability to walk off in the woods or to kneel by our bedside and to have a quiet, personal time of prayer, in which we talk with God about what’s going on in our lives, and then listen for what God has to say to us. That very personal and private expression of our faith is invaluable for each of us.

But a faith that is founded on personal choice also faces some particular challenges and temptations. The most obvious is that while the vast majority of Americans acknowledge a belief in God, far fewer are active in churches or synagogues or mosques. Somehow we have come to believe that we can be religious and not go to church.

The danger is that we take that personal expression of our faith, and say therefore I don’t need a faith community. I don’t need to go to church. Having a faith that is personal has been extended by some to say that it is private. Essentially, my faith is no one else’s business - not even God’s. That is both a temptation and a heresy that we find in our society.

In our text from the gospel of Matthew we find Jesus teaching His disciples. He is talking to them about a variety of issues and temptations that they will face. At the end of our text He says, “For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.”

In those words Jesus is lifting up for His followers the importance of a faith community, the importance of worshiping and sharing with others in love. We experience God’s presence not only out in the world somewhere, or not only within ourselves, but also in

the lives of others.

Most of you know that from your experiences here. When you gather here to worship, you greet many friends, but they're more than just friendships, for in those encounters with the people here you also experience the presence of Christ. It might come in the innocence of a child, or the insight and wisdom of our youth - which was lifted up so well a couple of months ago at our youth service. It might come in the caring comment or hug of a friend, but the concern that is expressed is more than for your physical and emotional well-being, although those concerns are certainly present as well.

The concern expressed is for your spiritual health and well-being, and that is the deepest concern of all. In the process, we often also experience the presence of Christ in that other person. It's not something that we can make happen, but it is very real, as we open ourselves to God's presence in the caring of a friend and fellow worshiper.

Our text from the book of Acts talks about that kind of faith experience. It describes a special time in the life of the church, shortly after that first Pentecost. The followers had experienced the pain and loss of Jesus' death. They had found themselves disorganized, confused, and unsure of what was next. Many of them had fled in fear, and then they experienced a wonderful moment of grace on that first Pentecost. In the midst of all of their fears and confusions they experienced the presence of God's Spirit in a totally unexpected and miraculous way.

They had gathered together, and there in that community they found the presence of God's Spirit. It was God's Spirit who took that disorganized, confused group of individuals and shaped them into a vital, alive, purpose-filled community of believers. That's the community that's described in our text.

They had an extremely close fellowship in which they cared about each other, and shared whatever was needed. They experienced a community that was founded upon their common worship and experience of God.

Now this text describes the community at it's best. They have been through an extremely traumatic time in which they were split apart, and so they are particularly grateful for this experience of community. When we read on we discover other times where there are problems that divide them, people who aren't always faithful, and a variety of other problems that are typical in communities - for we are not perfect. After all, we are communities that are formed with a group of imperfect people, and so we will be imperfect, and that is indeed part of our challenge - how we can grow as individuals and as a community.

But through all of this is the reminder of how we can be and indeed need to be nourished in our faith community. We need our worship together. We need our Sunday School and

Bible studies. We need our Youth Groups and our Women's Groups, our committees and our picnics and so much more. We need those experiences of community as we travel on our faith journeys. For in that community we find nourishment and strength, challenges and opportunities that we will find no where else on our faith journey.

We live in a world and a society that is often unchristian. The values that we find expressed at work or on the playground, in the checkout line at the store or on our tv's are often not Christian values. We need people who care about us, but whose caring goes beyond our physical and emotional well being to also include our spiritual well being. We need to worship together, to be challenged together, and to be energized together. We need the inspiring music of our choirs, the endearing smile of a child, and the wisdom of an older saint who has been through it all before.

We all know that there are many other ways that we could use this time - other things that we could be doing. But our worship together is vitally important to our spiritual health and well being. It is here that we are loved and encouraged and led forward in our efforts to live faithfully, so let us celebrate this wonderful gift that God has given to us, by gathering regularly to experience God's presence in our midst.

Amen