



Sermon of May 23, 1999



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"WHY JOIN THE CHURCH"

Acts 2:1-21

Because this is Pentecost Sunday, the birthday of the Church, and the day on which we will confirm the faith of our young people and receive them into the Church, I thought it would be appropriate to talk about, "Why Join The Church?"

Jean and I were driving down the freeway the first part of this week, on I-8, and she saw the title of the sermon on the marquee, "Why Join The Church?" She said, "That's the dullest title I've ever seen!" I asked her if she had ever heard Tammy Wynette sing, "Stand By Your Man"?

Actually I believe it is a good title because it reflects the opinion of many people, that it is not necessary to join the Church in order to be a Christian. I suppose most of your neighbors feel that way. They probably wonder what you are doing getting up so early on Sunday morning. I am sure they assume it is all right to visit a church now and then, on holy days, weddings and

funerals, but why join the Church?

There is also that antipathy in our time toward "organized religion." Most people would say that they are religious, in some fashion, but they don't like organized religion. That reminds me of Will Willimon's anecdote from when he was the pastor of a church in South Carolina. His members went out into their neighborhoods to invite people to church. One man said, "I don't believe in organized religion." They said, "Good. Then you will really love our church!"

We laugh at that, and anyone who has been around the church, I am sure, appreciates it. But, in fact, Christianity is an organized religion. It is a corporate body in which you hold membership.

That is what happened at Pentecost. An organization was formed, in the real meaning of that word, "organization." Things were brought together into a whole and made a body. Paul called the church the "body of Christ," with a mission to perform in this world. The mission of the Church is to transform the world. You can't be a Christian apart from that community, or apart from its mission in the world. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. To be a Christian is to be a part of the "body of Christ," the Church.

At Pentecost, as you heard the text for this morning, Peter preached a sermon, the first Christian sermon, to those who had gathered in the streets of Jerusalem. He explained what had happened to them. You heard the first part of that sermon this morning. He said that in Jesus Christ a new age has been created. With the resurrection of Jesus this power came into the world to create a new world, a new age is here. And the Church is the community of those who made the choice to leave the old age and enter the new age that has been inaugurated by the resurrection of our Lord.

When he finished his sermon, the crowd asked, "What are we to do?" Peter said, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." And ever since Pentecost, a choice has to be made. Where are you going to give your loyalty? To the world as it is, or to the world as it will someday be? To the old age, or to the new age? To the kingdoms of this world, or to the Kingdom of God that was revealed and inaugurated in this world in Jesus Christ?

The Church wanted to make that as clear as it could. So the first question that has been asked of those who join the Church is, "Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?" Only when you did that, only after you made that choice, were you asked the second question, "Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church?"

Joining the Church was to make a choice. It is a clear choice between this age, the present age is the way it was called, or the age to come, the Kingdom that Christ came to inaugurate. That's the way it was.

The problem is that the line between the Church and the world is now erased. The first vow in the service of ritual for membership, called "the renunciation," has been restored now to the Methodist ritual. You will hear it if you come to the confirmation service at 11:00 a.m. We will ask those young people to renounce the evil powers of this world. But it is significant to note

that it was dropped from the ritual at the beginning of the 20th century, and then restored at the end of the 20th century. It is as if living through this century we have discovered we made a mistake.

It was dropped at the end of the 19th century when Americans were so optimistic about the future of this society, about the future of the whole world. There were a number of reasons for this. The westward movement across this continent revealed a vast, beautiful land with seemingly unlimited resources, so that the life that anybody wanted to live was possible on this land. The Industrial Revolution had proven its strength and was working miracles. The advances of science, especially in physics at that time, had shown that the power of theoretical sciences could transform this world. The strength of democracy had been tested in the Civil War and had survived. Now democracy, in fact, was spreading around the world, all of which created an enormous optimism in this country.

There was a whole spate of utopian novels written in the last part of the 19th century as that society anticipated the millennium. All these novels saw humankind using the power that was available to them now, the power of the machine, the power of the enlightened mind, brought to us by science, and the spread of universal education, to create a utopia, a perfect society. It was now possible.

The most famous of those utopian novels was one written by a man named Edward Bellamy, called *Looking Backwards*, which is still, incidentally, among the best sellers of all time. It sold millions of copies.

It was written in the 1890s, and it looked forward to seeing what the world would be like in the 1990s, in the decade in which we are living. It envisioned people living in ideal cities, with beautiful environments crafted by human engineering, with culture freely accessed and used by everybody. No crime in the 1990s, they said, because everybody would have all their material wants satisfied, and there would be no need for crime. Everybody would be enlightened by education. Everybody would be educated and everybody happy. And, most importantly, Bellamy wrote, there will be no more wars. By 1990 people would look back and barely remember the time when there were wars in this world.

I point out to you that back in the 1890s, was about the same time that the Church dropped the renunciations from the ritual of membership. Caught up in this optimism, they felt it an embarrassment to be different from the progressive institutions of the day. There were even some Christians who hailed the 20th century as the "Christian century." They said, now all the work of the Church for 2000 years was finally going to bear fruit, and this will be the "Christian century." There is no longer any need for us to set ourselves apart from the world, because the world has now become Christian, or will soon be in this 20th century.

So they dropped what they said was a medieval way of looking at the world. That medieval way, they said, is to see the world controlled by spiritual forces. That is just superstition. We have evolved out of that way of thinking. We have other means now of explaining these things. We have different ways now of dealing with them. We know what causes people to do bad things. All we need to do is remove the causes, change the environment, and we will get rid of these last pockets of the resistance of evil.

Incidentally, there was another change that occurred about the same time, a very significant one. There are two portraits of Jesus in the New Testament. In some places he is pictured as an exorcist, casting out demons. In other places he is seen as a teacher, dispensing moral wisdom.

At the threshold of the 20th century, the Church said, Jesus the teacher is the Jesus that is appropriate for this age. Jesus the exorcist has become an embarrassment, it is too primitive. We have evolved far beyond that now, we don't need exorcisms now. We need only teaching. Our problems are not caused by evil forces outside of us, our problems are caused by ignorance. So if we could only teach everybody the moral truths, such as the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, then all these problems will disappear, and the Kingdom would come.

So in the 20th century the established church by and large lost its identity, and became like any other good institution. The Church was to be supported in exchange for the Church giving support, only in church language that would be "blessing," to the society. So that is the way it has been. The society supports the Church, and the Church is supposed to support this age.

But now we are at the end of the 20th century, and looking back on perhaps the most inhumane century the world has ever known. Instead of getting rid of the evil powers, it appears that the evil powers have run rampant in these last hundred years, with the devastation of wars paving the century from the beginning to the end, with the old plagues of mankind: famine, disease, violence, not eradicated, but prospering.

So the Church went back to the Bible. It saw that the early Church believed that this world is in bondage to evil powers, and you could be made captive of those powers. And there is nothing in that to laugh at, nothing to scoff at. Those powers can grab a hold of a person's life, or of a society, and never let it go until it is destroyed. And, as if to say, we made a terrible mistake, the Church said at the end of this century, we are not able to bring the Kingdom of God in by our own efforts, not by our good intentions, not even by legislation. We still live in a world of demonic powers. We must still take evil seriously. We must still choose, as the first Christians did, whom we will serve.

So the Church, in 1988, restored the renunciations into the ritual for membership. It is interesting. At the end of the 19th century, anticipating the 20th century, they wrote utopian novels. At the end of the 20th century, anticipating the 21st century, they are writing science fiction. In utopian novels the future was seen as a kind of Garden of Eden, a perfect society. In much of science fiction the future is seen as the battle between the spiritual forces of wickedness and the evil powers in heavenly places.

I don't believe that those powers are supernatural. I believe that they are human in origin. I believe that they are the accumulated sin of generations that, in time, becomes a spiritual force in society. Social diseases are like physical diseases, they are manageable at first, but if you don't do anything about them, they soon become too powerful for you to do anything about them. They become powers unto themselves.

For instance, "the spirit of the times." That's what it is sometimes called. The sophisticated word is, "zeitgeist," the spirit of the times. It is not some entity. It doesn't dwell someplace in the high heavens. But it is, nevertheless, real. It is very powerful. The spirit of the times says, everyone

does it.

Young people are especially vulnerable to the spirit of the times. Parents know that. Parents fear that power. They fear that it is stronger than they are. They see it in the entertainment and advertising business that their children are exposed to. They want to protect their children from the spirit of the times. They see the Church as that institution that stands over and against the spirit of the times, and can teach their children to say "No" to some things, as a way of saying "Yes" to the life that God is offering to them.

There is another spirit. It is called the spirit of revenge. It erupts from time to time, as you can see in our time. It permeates all of our life. It is usually portrayed as something courageous, or noble, or honorable. It has taken on those qualities in the stories, or the myths, that we use to teach the young, especially young boys. It tells them, it is honorable to get revenge. Worst of all, the worst lie of all, it tells them that violence is an honorable way of solving your problems.

The Church stands over and against the evil spirit of revenge that permeates all of our life, and offers the example, instead, of forgiveness and reconciliation.

There are other spirits, more subtle spirits, that bind us as well: greed, self-centeredness, exploitation of other people. To all of these the Church says, "No!" To the spirit of greed the Church offers the example of a community where generosity through the stewardship of our possessions is the way to find life. To the spirit of self-centeredness the Church offers a community where other people are considered to be precious in the sight of God, and to be treated as children of God. To the spirit of the exploitation of others the Church offers a community where service to other people is the pattern of success.

There is a phrase from a old prayer in which I have found meaning. It is a prayer for the Church, written many years ago, by Harry Emerson Fosdick.

When we compare her with all human institutions, we rejoice, because there is none like her. But when we compare her with the mind of the Master, we bow in contrition.

The Church is a human institution, so it is frail. It is imperfect, and sinful, and sometimes, in its history, it has been spectacularly sinful. But there is something else here. This is what Pentecost says, there is something else here. There is a spirit that is different than the spirit of the age. It is a spirit that enlivens and reforms and renews life. We call that spirit the Holy Spirit. And on this day, on Pentecost, we give thanks to God, that God gave us the Spirit who is with us in the Church.

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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