

Hebrews 5: 1-10
Mark 10: 35-45
October 18, 2015
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church

In a recent newsletter article I expressed the fear that what is called with increasing disdain, “organized religion”, is going the way of telephone book.

Remember the telephone book? It was the universal source of instant information about everything we wanted to know—the number of a local plumber, the local restaurant, the address of an appliance repair business. It was also the place for finding someone’s telephone number. Remember this? “I wanted to call you, but I didn’t know your number.” “Well, it is in the telephone book.” When I first moved out on my own and had my own telephone I took pleasure in finding my name and address in the book. It was as if I had arrived. I was now my own person. My name and address *were in the book!*

A while ago the residential numbers disappeared from the listings. Not long after the phone books would pile up outside the door with no takers. Recently I was asked, “Do you want to continue to receive the telephone book?” I didn’t want to hurt the person’s feelings, so I said, “Sure!” But what I thought was, “Not really.”

Is the local gathering of those of us who find meaning and support in organized religion following a similar path? Has it ceased to matter whether or not our name is *in the book* or on the roles of a given congregation? Has our culture outgrown this way of seeking God, finding meaning in our lives and making a difference in the world? I certainly hope not. And yet it is impossible to avoid the trends in worship attendance and financial support of individual congregations and the larger denominations of which they are a part. We are in an era where it

is common to hear, “I am spiritual but not religious,” as if there is an easy distinction to be made between the two. I personally think this distinction is false and dangerous. I also believe that the community of faith which as Christians we call the Body of Christ, far from having become obsolete is more necessary than ever. But we are at risk. The culture around us has changed. The culture has shed organized religion as a necessary part of the glue that holds society together.

In addition, the church is perceived by many as a source of rigid doctrines and judgmental attitudes. It is attacked as too political or not political enough. It is always asking for money, it is boring, it is irrelevant to today’s modern outlook. In today’s stressed out world who has time for “going to church” once a week?

As we begin our annual solicitation for the financial support of the ministry of Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church we must ask ourselves, “Is what this church offers worth supporting?” Is the God in whose name we gather worth making known to the larger community? Is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, his teachings and the way he lived in the world while he was with us worth communicating and passing on to another generation? In short is this precious spiritual community worth fighting for? Is it worth our best prayers and engagement?

I ask this question not to condemn. In the past few weeks I have become deeply aware of what a wonderful and healthy vital congregation we are. We are an outpost of Christ’s light. My heart literally breaks with love and appreciation for you. And yet we cannot take this gift and this mission for granted. We must, I believe, become intentional about sustaining the witness to Jesus Christ which has been lived on this plot of land for at least 200 years.

It is the ministry of the Stewardship team to let you know how much money we need to sustain this witness. It is my intent to inspire the Holy Spirit in and among us to awaken us to our part in this important *and spiritual* dimension of Christian discipleship.

This morning we are presented with two texts from the New Testament. From the book of Hebrews we hear to our modern ears a rather obscure passage about a high priest in a temple offering sacrifices. The writer of the passage is trying to persuade his Jewish audience that Jesus has assumed the role of the high priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the role of the high priest to present the sacrifices of the people to God to gain forgiveness for their sins. Jesus, the writer argues, has replaced the high priest once and for all. No longer do people need to bring animals to sacrifice for their sins. Now they simply need to trust that when Jesus died on the cross, he died for their sins once and for all. If they wonder whether they are safe in God's heart they have only to look to Jesus. Yet the writer chooses not to emphasize Jesus superstar divine power here. Instead the writer speaks of the human side.

He (the high priest) is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself is subject to weakness; and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people....So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest....In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death.

What do we learn from this? For me it is a crucial part of my faith, *and my experience*, that God is not some powerful tyrant condemning some souls to hell and preserving others for heaven. When God wanted God's people to know him personally he became known in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. God could have had Jesus simply be the extension of his power; but instead Jesus came as a vulnerable child to a humble family caught up in the great and dangerous movements of history. God entrusted Jesus to flawed humans. Jesus grew up with

flawed and loving parents among people who loved him but did not know what to do with him. For this he suffered. He also suffered when he experienced the pain of his fellow humans trying their best to cope in an often cruel and unreliable world.

I love Jesus for this. I love him because, as no human can do, *he understands what it is like to be me*. He knows what it is like *to be you*. And through his life, crucifixion and resurrection we discover an amazing thing: *we are worth dying for!*

Think about this. Have you ever thought that someone would care that much about you that he or she would put your life ahead of theirs? How often have we heard and said that “Jesus died for our sins.” We have said it so often that it has become routine. Indeed the world out there feels the same way. The words no longer have personal meaning. Indeed as MJ pointed out a few weeks ago the word “sin” is meaningless for vast numbers of people. But today can you hear not “Jesus died for your sins;” but, Jesus, a real human being, who had every possibility of distancing himself from your and my flawed life *put our lives ahead of his own*.

Isn't there some small suppressed desire in your heart that wishes you were that important to someone? Well you are. Don't deflect this love—let it in. How does your world look from the awareness that you are worth dying for?

So, now, what about this church of ours? Where in this culture is this message. Where else can we go to hear on a regular basis that we are worth dying for? Where can we go when the culture tells us that our only worth in the world is in how we look, where we live, how successful our children are, what the right things are to buy. Where do we hear the message that human life is so precious in God's sight that he could not allow us to go through life

believing that this life is all there is and that the things and relationships of this life are all that we can hope to experience?

Where is the community of flawed people who courageously seek to grow in this miraculous trust and to welcome others to discover that they too are worth dying for?

There may be many other places and communities. But this morning I am particularly aware of one that is present right here and right now. Amen.