

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
February 8, 2009

1 Corinthians 9: 16-23

NON-MEMBER BENEFITS

The Church of Jesus Christ may be the only community created explicitly to serve the needs of those who are not members. Well, that was the idea when Jesus commanded us to go into the world and baptize all in his name making them disciple, but as soon as I said those words some of us thought, “Yeah, but what about my needs within the community?”

Even when we’re empathizing—taking care of one another—being there for ourselves, for the most part, creates a genuine sense of the quality of life to which we have been called in Christ and that quality demonstrates itself again for the benefit of those who are not amongst our members.

The nature of our communion is to welcome people who seek to respond, trust, be obedient, and to accept the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Participating in worship in this church is a privilege which is open to all.

Our entrance into the membership, into the body of Christ, is all directed at allowing others to also participate.

Baptism, unlike that which we offered this morning, is available to everyone who seeks to be a part of what God is doing in this world and in this place. But it is not ours to give. It’s not something that we own and parcel out. In truth, we belong more to baptism than baptism belongs to us. We’re here as members to participate and proclaim in sharing the good news. Part of the good news is that others can also proclaim the gospel of Christ. Other communities exist that exhibit his vitality and renewing spirit.

We are a church so that we can pray together and learn to live the scriptures—so that we can support one another with money and time and ability. None of us could do what we attempt as Bush Hill Presbyterian on our own. But in sharing responsibility, we show to the world in the manner that we love one another has come from the one who first loved us—being responsible in how we treat one another, demonstrating that if we are going to serve Christ, not just ourselves, then we have to serve one another.

We welcome and encourage others to respond to God’s activities in this world, and we do so dedicating ourselves to work for peace and justice and freedom and human fulfillment. But we do not believe it is possible for us to be truly fulfilled—for anyone to be truly fulfilled—on our own. We believe that there is a God-shaped void in each of us that can only be filled by the Holy Spirit.

Now Paul says some shocking things in Corinthians. He's going to become all things for all people? That doesn't sound very healthy. But he's going to live in such a manner that he understands the perspective of the Jew, of those bound by the law, those who have rejected the law, though he himself refuses to turn his back on God's law in Christ. He does exactly what Jesus does.

When people come, if they are willing to be genuine—to be themselves—he meets them where they are. And that is what we do as Christ's body alive today. We are to meet people where they are. Not where we are. We are to listen with the same ears that Paul learned to listen to those around him.

It's all good theology. But here's what it looks like: Philip Yancey tells the story of a friend who decides to watch a sunset while laying on his back in a lake. He pushes off from the shore about a hundred yards and lies there watching for the sun to come to the horizon. As dusk begins to take place, a very freak fog rolls in and all the remaining light from the setting sun is diffused. And suddenly this swimmer can no longer make out in which direction the sun is setting. He splashes about and his swimming turns into a panic. He swims in a straight line, or attempts to, then loses confidence and turns 90 degrees. First left, then right. (Does this sound like your spiritual life?) He can feel his heart pounding in his chest, faster and faster, to the point where he thought he could actually hear it. He finally had to stop and float on his back again to try to conserve some energy. He forced himself to breathe slower. After a time of regaining his strength, he tried again, but to no avail. It was like he was swimming in soup. And then, at last, he hears a faint voice calling from the shore. He pointed his body in the direction of the sound and followed it to safety.

Non-members and members, inactive and people who are barely participating, those who visit us and those we meet on the street are entitled to hear the faint voice coming from the shore which will redirect their efforts. The sounds of the church proclaiming the gospel—the Good News, the sounds that are best exhibited in the waters that fall upon us at our baptism, these are the sounds which create order in chaos. These are the sounds those who are hungry and thirsty for meaning find here.

It is our privilege to offer everyone who comes into our midst the same benefits, the same joy and peace and freedom that we have already received from Christ. This is our purpose and our calling. And though we cannot do it on our own strength, in another place, Paul says, with Christ, all things become a reality. So may it be, now and always, for us.

Amen.