

I TOO, MINISTER HERE

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 2011

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**CELEBRATING 175 YEARS OF MINISTRY: SHARING TIME,
TALENTS, AND TREASURES**

Ephesians 4: 11-16

Sometimes I get asked to do funerals for people who considered themselves members of the church, but who haven't actively participated in the life and ministry of the church for a long time. They never formally left the church; they just stopped showing up. They stopped worshipping with us and studying with us and praying with us and serving others with us and caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ with us. They were members in name only but no longer shared their time, talents and treasures with the church.

When I pull their membership cards from the inactive file drawer, I always feel a tinge of sadness. The date when they joined our church is listed on a card; a day when I imagine they were filled with spiritual vitality, a day when they felt compelled to stand in the midst of the gathered community and made a public witness to their faith in Jesus Christ, a day when they spoke vows promising to "love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind and soul and their neighbor as themselves."

But somehow they fell out of love with God. Their files record the dates of significant milestones in their lives: baptisms, weddings and funerals. Sometimes there are yellowed newspaper articles about them that our front desk volunteers clipped out of the Enquirer and attached to their file. There are dates when they served in different ministries of the church: teaching Sunday school, ushering, serving on the parish care committee, joining a woman's circle...but none of those dates are current. Dozens of years have passed since they came to offer their worship to God: to give thanks, to sing praises, to hear the gospel proclaimed, to be in fellowship with other believers. Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be

also...” and their hearts were far from this faith community. They stopped sharing their gifts for ministry: they stopped being generous, they stopped caring, they stopped serving.

In one of Jesus’ first and most memorable parables, he likened the life of faith to a sower who went out to sow some seed. Some of the seed fell on the path where it was trampled under foot and eaten by birds. Some of the seed fell on rocky ground where it quickly sprouted but withered in the heat of the afternoon sun because it had no depth of root. Some seed fell among the thorns where it sprouted and grew but was soon choked out by weeds. But some seed fell on fertile ground and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty, sixty and hundred fold.

Sometimes I get asked to do funeral services for people who once considered themselves members but whose faith never grew. Other things displaced their commitment to love the Lord their God with all their heart, mind and soul and their neighbors as themselves. Most of the time, they never decided to leave the church. They just stopped showing up. Occasionally there were hard feelings over decisions that were made or causes that were taken up by the church. Sometimes there were conflicts with particular pastors or parishioners. But most of the time they just gradually drifted away. They just neglected their spiritual development. Other things preoccupied their attention: raising their kids, advancing their careers, traveling, gardening, golfing...

What I notice when I meet with families who have dropped out of church to make funeral plans for loved ones is that their faith is arrested. Grown men and women are walking around with a faith that hasn’t developed beyond the simplistic lessons they learned in Sunday school when they were children. They try reaching back to find something meaningful to hold on to, but it isn’t there. It’s been trampled underfoot, eaten by birds, wilted by the sun, and choked by weeds. They haven’t set foot in a church for

decades and so they haven't heard the gospel proclaimed. They haven't opened a Bible and reflected on any of the formative stories of our faith. They haven't been in dialogue with other people of faith about their deepest convictions. They haven't been challenged to put their faith into practice. And as a result, their faith has not grown up with them and it can not comfort or sustain them in their grief. It is sad to watch grown men and women grasping at cheesy poems and sentimental nonsense to help them make meaning of their loss.

Today our scripture passage from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminded us that we all have something important to contribute to help build up the body of Christ, the church. We all have gifts to share, responsibilities to assume, lessons to learn, truths to speak. We need each other's help to sustain our spiritual development. We cannot do it in isolation. The church isn't an organization to join and then neglect. It is a movement that requires our active participation. We are constantly working together, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ."

Those who claim to be spiritual without being religious are lying. What they are really saying is that they aren't willing to invest the time and effort it takes to live the life of faith. Faith requires community. Faith grows when we show up week after week to re-center our lives on God in worship. Faith grows when we meet in small groups to explore the ancient truths passed on in the testimonies of our spiritual ancestors. Faith grows when we put it into practice by working together to serve the needs of others. Faith grows when we help each other maintain spiritual disciplines of daily prayer. Faith grows when we model the love of Christ in our caring relationships with one another. Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that faith requires community.

For 175 years, this church has been helping to cultivate fertile ground for the seeds of faith to take root, and grow and mature and produce thirty, sixty, a hundred fold yield. Those who have actively participated in the life and ministry of this church have been blessed by and have been a blessing to the people of faith who have gathered here over the years.

On Tuesday afternoon we will gather at 1:30 at Farley Estes and Dowdle Funeral home to celebrate the life of Jim Cox. Jim was a long standing member of our church who died shortly after noon last Wednesday. Jim Cox had a faith that grew in fertile soil. All throughout his life he shared the gifts that he had to offer and his faith was nourished by the community of the faithful gathered around him here in this place.

By the time I met Jim, he had faced more than his share of hardship. After retiring from a long and productive career at Kellogg, Jim nursed his wife Betty through a debilitating struggle with Parkinson's disease. They gave up their home and were among the first to move into the senior apartments at North Point Woods. After he fell and injured his back, he was confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life. He buried his wife. He moved from independent living to assisted living. He developed aphasia and struggled to find the words that he wanted to say. As his memory loss progressed he eventually had to be moved from assisted living to the Oaks Memory Care unit. But Jim's faith was rooted in fertile soil. At every step of his life's journey, Jim embodied the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. He was the person that the staff always raved about, the one they looked forward to caring for, the one who was patient, understanding, thoughtful, considerate and pleasant to be around.

Jim Cox wasn't a member of this church in name only. He

was actively engaged in ministry of this church. He showed up week after week and shared his time, talent and treasures with the faith community. Even when he wasn't physically able to come here anymore, he was one of our greatest ambassadors at North Point Woods. Through his active participation in the life and ministry of the faith community, Jim grew into the measure of the full stature of Christ.

We are here today, 175 years after the four founding families first gathered in a log cabin to worship together because of members like Jim Cox. You can't be an inactive member of this church. The slogan that we have been using here since 1942 to characterize our life together is not, "I, too, am a member here." It is, "I, too, minister here." Christ calls us together into this community of faith to help each other grow up into spiritual maturity, into measure of the full stature of Christ. Amen.

