

Provoking Love
Rev. Cindy Maddox
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Hebrews 10:22-25

The “good old days” of church membership are always those eras remembered for their crowded Sunday school classrooms, overflowing youth programs, and plethora of young families.

And yes, we like most churches have such a time period in our past. However, I was reading through part of our church history recently and came across a statement expressing deep concern about the decrease in young people attending worship . . . in the 1950s. Church attendance ebbs and flows, and yes, the church in America has been in decline for many decades. But our passage of scripture for today reminds us that this has often been the case.

The writer admonishes the readers to not neglect meeting together, “as is the habit of some.” We don’t know who these “some” were, but clearly they were slacking in church attendance.

Experts give a variety of reasons for the decline of Christianity in the U.S., but the fact remains that fewer people go to church, and those who do attend church go less frequently. One of the causes, I think, is the increasing emphasis on individualism. We seek a solitary spiritual path.

Rev. Dr. Lillian Daniel is the Conference Minister of the UCC in Michigan, but she got herself into a bit of hot water thirteen years ago back when she was pastoring in Illinois.

She wrote a daily devotional that then went somewhat viral on HuffPo, entitled “Spiritual But Not Religious? Please Stop Boring Me.”

She wrote:

“On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out
I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me
that he is ‘spiritual but not religious.’

Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight,
unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.
Next thing you know, he’s telling me that he finds God in the sunsets.

These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. . . .
Like people who go to church don’t see God in the sunset!
Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building.
How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature.
As if we don’t hear that in the psalms, the creation stories,
and throughout our deep tradition.

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn’t interest me [she continues].
There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself.
What is interesting is doing this work in community,
where other people might call you on stuff,
or heaven forbid, disagree with you.
Where life with God gets rich and provocative
is when you dig deeply into a tradition
that you did not invent all for yourself.”¹

She gets one more super snarky jab in with these two sentences:

“Thank you for sharing, spiritual but not religious sunset person.
You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture,
right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull
but find themselves uniquely fascinating.”²

Alrighty then! You can see why she took some heat.

She not only offended the multitude of people who consider themselves
“spiritual but not religious,”
but also came across as sanctimonious and dismissive.
But she ended the essay in a way that made sense to me,
if we could imagine a softening of her tone.

¹ https://www.ucc.org/daily-devotional/feed-your-spirit_daily-devotional_spiritual-but-not-religious/

² Ibid.

She wrote about that airplane flight: “Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead?
 Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough
 to encounter God in a real human community?
 Because when this flight gets choppy, that’s who I want by my side,
 holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me,
 just like we try to do in church.”³

Just like we try to do in church.

It’s not that we don’t find God in nature.

We find God in nature but also in the much harder place of human nature,
 in relationships, in community.

That is where iron sharpens iron.

That is where we are honed.

That is where we are challenged to do and be and become

That is where, in these words from Hebrews,

“we provoke one another to love and good deeds.”

I’m not sure if I have told you about Tyler.

I think he was around sixteen when we met.

He and other teenagers with developmental disabilities
 cleaned our church every week as part of their job training.

But that’s not what brought him and his family to our congregation.

His parents, Michelle and Dave, spoke with someone at a Special Olympics event
 about how hard it was for their family to find a church.

Every church said they were welcoming, but they didn’t mean it—
 not when Tyler didn’t fit their expectations.

The person the parents spoke with happened to be a member of our church—
 not even an active member, but he knew enough about us to know
 that Tyler and his family would truly be welcome there.

Tyler changed our congregation.

³ Ibid.

He was affectionate,
 though his affection usually took the form of him messing up your hair.

You could look around the sanctuary and see where he'd been.

When visitors were invited to introduce themselves at the beginning of worship,
 he would always introduce who he was sitting with,
 whether it was the moderator or a choir member
 or the seventy-year-old woman who was born into that church.

One woman admitted to me that it always made her feel good when he did that.
 "I feel claimed," she said.

He claimed us and he changed us.

His appreciation for the little things made us more joyful.

His love for all of us made us love more fully.

Every time he had another Special Olympics event and won a medal,
 he would share it during the time for celebrations and concerns,
 and we would cheer.

Then Tyler's family invited another family from Special Olympics,
 and soon we were hosting the Special Olympics Christmas dance party
 in our fellowship hall.

We became passionate about meeting the needs of these kids.

The door opened wider when the regional games were to be held in our city.

The regional event brings in thousands of people,
 and one of the highlights of the day (other than winning medals)
 was what they called Olympic Town.

Olympic Town is where all the athletes and their siblings would go
 when they weren't competing, to play games and win prizes.

That year, they had nobody to run Olympic Town.

The organizers were getting desperate,

and we could not imagine letting these kids down.

So our little church took on the challenge.

We recruited the Boy Scouts who met at our church to help,
 and I think one of the school's social clubs helped a little.

But mostly it was us—

a church with just 230 members, average Sunday attendance of 70—
and we entertained over 2000 athletes and siblings all day.

We had carnival games and crafts and music and so many prizes.

I'll never forget the excitement on their faces when they won,
or how proud they were to show each and every person their medals.

I'll never forget the Special Olympian who introduced himself to me as
"I'm Stan the Man with the Master Plan!"

Our church was changed by one young man and his family,
and we were challenged to even greater love and good deeds.

A clergy colleague told me about a man named Joe
who started attending her church each Sunday from a nearby nursing facility.
She said, "I could tell from his speech he was medicated.

Sure enough it was discovered he was over medicated.

When he recovered he looked for ways to do mission where he was.

This then happened: His roommate was dying.

The facility asked if he wanted to be moved and he said

No he would stay.

He noticed that the aids were not taking very good care of his roommate.

So he went to the Director. It improved but then fell off again.

The director didn't respond the second time he went to her.

He called the family. And finally, Adult Protective Services.

Joe held his roommate's hand when he passed.

Joe said he was just serving Jesus where he was."

I am not saying that churches have the corner on kindness.

Stories of random acts of kindness are everywhere you look.

I read a story this week about a German grandmother who became concerned
about people in wheelchairs not being able to enter storefronts

that had a ledge at their entrance.

So she started collecting legos, and she builds these mini ramps out of legos

and glues them together and then gives them to businesses

to make their facilities more accessible.

The colorful bricks became a symbol of welcome in their town.

This story has been told throughout the gay community for many years,
but I know in my heart that it is true.

It took place back in the time before there were hotlines for queer folks,
when people had limited places to go to get support.

A woman wrote, "I used to manage an LGBT bookstore.

One night a caller says he thinks he might be gay and is considering self-harm.

We were not a crisis center!

But as long as we're talking, he's safe, right?

So I talk to this guy and I answer questions, and I try to be encouraging,
and I'm maybe sounding a little frantic

and I'm definitely ignoring the 4-5 customers in the store.

And this angel of a woman puts her hand on my shoulder.

'My turn,' she says,

and this 50-something lesbian talks to this young stranger on the phone.

And a line forms behind her.

Every customer in that store knew that call, knew that feeling,
and every person took a turn talking to that young man."

There are a thousand ways to make the world better.

There are a thousand ways to kiss the ground.

And we're going to need all of them.

Our world will not be saved by simple random acts of kindness,
though they are certainly a start.

Our scripture draws out "a still more surprising idea: our work of love
is the work of provocation, irritation, and even exasperation (paroxismos).

We should provoke one another to love and good works. . . .

We so often talk about love as something without irritation or exasperation,
a stance toward the other that involves toleration, patience, and comfort.

But the [author of Hebrews] notes that we should understand one another

in the paroxismos of love — the irritation of love.”⁴
Our world will be saved when we join together,
when we live in community and take strength from solidarity,
and when we are willing to irritate one another into action
and provoke one another into love.
May it be so.

⁴ Shaner, Katherine A.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-hebrews-1011-14-15-18-19-25-4>