

Treasures of the Transformed Life # 1

Priming the Pump

Acts 2:42-47

10 16 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Treasures of the Transformed Life Introduction

This morning we are beginning a new worship series entitled *Treasures of the Transformed Life*. It is based upon the book written by Dr. John Ed Mathison.

Dr. Mathison was the senior pastor of Frazer Memorial UMC in Montgomery, Alabama for thirty-four years. Under his leadership, the church grew from 400 to 8,600 members. I'm excited to announce that Dr. Mathison will join us for the culmination of the series on November 20 when he will preach at all three worship services.

The church is providing a free book to each family of the congregation. If you don't have yours yet, make sure to pick one up today. Each copy contains a bookmark with a reading schedule for the next weeks. Our adult Sunday School classes are also using the book for their curriculum in October and November.

I believe this multifaceted approach will produce great dividends for our church. When God's people unite in a common cause, the miraculous occurs. Focus is the difference between a flash light and a LASER beam. We are focusing all of our efforts on this study of Scriptural and spiritual principles.

Part 1 of the book is entitled *Priming the Pump*. A pump is designed to draw water out of a well to ground level. If air gets into the pump, then it loses pressure. Priming the pump means putting water into the system to make it air free.

Today we are priming the pump for the worship series with an overview of the book. Then we will explore each part in more detail during the next five weeks.

Scripture: Acts 2:42-47

Spiritual Dehydration

Dr. Mathison tells the story of a **little girl** who didn't eat her lunch. Later in the afternoon she complained to her mommy about a tummy ache. Her mother replied, "Your tummy aches because it is empty. If you put something in it, then you will feel better."

Later that evening their pastor came by to visit. He happened to mention that he had a terrible headache. The little girl told him, "Your head aches because it is empty. If you put something in it, then you will feel better!"

We have all experienced such emptiness within our lives. The 17th century French scientist, Blaise Pascal, said: "*There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every person which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.*"

The subtitle of *Treasures of the Transformed Life* is *Satisfying Your Soul's Thirst for More*. Many people suffer from spiritual dehydration. In Psalm 63:1, David cried out to the Lord: "*O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirst for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*"

The world was never designed to meet the deep needs of our soul. Only a living relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer can fill the empty void in our lives. Only Jesus Christ, the living water, quenches our soul-deep thirst.

Dr. Mathison suggests a surprising source for transforming our lives through God's grace. He explores the **five-fold vow** people make when joining the United Methodist Church. We promise to uphold it with "*our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.*" Practicing each of these disciplines helps satisfy our soul's thirst for more.

Church Membership

People often ask me how to become a **member of the church**. First and last, this is something that God does FOR us. Those who accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior are part of God's people. Our heavenly Father adopts us as his children, and we are born again into a family with many brother and sisters in Christ. Every Christian automatically belongs to the **church universal**.

Our membership in the church universal is good news AND bad news. The good news is that we belong to a community of faith and the communion of saints. At its very best, the church is a foretaste of heaven on earth. Today's Scripture lesson from Acts 2 gives a glimpse of Christ's body in complete harmony.

The bad news is that the church IS our family; and you can pick your friends, but you're stuck with your relatives! We all have branches on our family trees that we would like to prune. However, we don't get to pick and choose who belongs to our extended family. I suppose that's a good thing—no doubt some would want to exclude ME!

B. The Church Particular

So membership in the church universal is automatic. Each Christian is a part of the body of Christ. Then this leads to participation in an individual congregation. To borrow a phrase: "*Think global, act local.*" Our membership in the church universal leads to participation in the **church particular**.

In the United Methodist Church, we can join the church several different ways. Members are **baptized** into the faith either as infants, children, or adults. Then each believer has the opportunity to join the church by **Profession of Faith**. Through a series of questions and answers, we profess our faith in God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We promise to live as faithful members of his church. Then we are confirmed as members of God's church.

Sometimes people join by **Reaffirmation of Faith**. They have joined the church previously but feel a need to publicly affirm their faith again. This can be a very meaningful moment for both the individual and the congregation.

Another way people join our church is through **Transfer of Membership** from another United Methodist congregation or a different denomination. We recognize the baptism and church membership of other traditions and celebrate that these persons have chosen to associate with our particular congregation.

Low Versus High Expectations

How we become a part of the church universal and particular is fairly simple. What is expected afterwards, however, is more complex.

Truth to tell, churches have rather **low membership expectations** compared to most organizations. We require no initiation fee, background check, references, resume, orientation session, or membership class. In our denomination, we don't even get to vote on folk before they join! If someone wants to join the church, then we've glad to have them. Adopting a pet at the local Humane Society requires more paperwork and effort than joining your typical church.

A fellow pastor tells about a couple who came to see him. They lived in the community and wanted to join the church SO they would have a minister to eventually bury them. My friend explained that they didn't have to belong to the church in order to be buried. Then he shared with her what church membership could mean in her life.

With only a slight pause, the woman said, "Well, we don't want all of THAT. We just want a place to be buried. If you'll do that any way, we're not interested in joining." Then she left! I suppose the next time he sees her will be horizontal in a coffin.

Many view the local church as a convenient place to mark major milestones in life. Ministers are here for births, weddings, and funerals to "*hatch, match, and dispatch!*" Yet these very same persons would be outraged if anyone tried to remove their names from the church roll.

We live in a consumer society where people demand to know what the church can do for them. Certainly this is an appropriate question. Yet sometimes our expectations of church membership are self-centered rather than Christ-centered. In an egocentric culture, we want to know what the church can do for ME.

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The other question we need to ask is what WE can do for Christ's church. If you listen closely the next time someone joins, you might be amazed at the **high expectations of church membership**. We enter into a covenant not only with each other but also with God. Members make holy promises to our Lord. If we take our vows seriously, then we might well be overwhelmed by the high expectations of church membership.

Old *American Express* ads declared: "*Membership has its privileges.*" The unspoken corollary is: "*Membership has its responsibilities.*" When we join the church, we promise to support it with "*our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.*"

Prayers, Presence, Gifts, and Service

A. Prayers

Prayer is a vital part of personal faith and church membership. We commit ourselves to pray for one another. I am honored as your pastor to be included in your prayers. I often have people assure me that they pray for me and the church daily. I need your prayers. And you need the practice. I cannot tell you how much that means to me . . . and I cannot even begin to imagine the difference it has made in my life and ministry.

In our weekly church staff meetings, we begin our time by sharing prayer concerns and celebrations among our own families. Then we move on to the larger church. This occurs when the church gathers and scatters.

God's people are called to be a people of prayer.

B. Presence

We promise to be **present** at the church. The past decade has been an exciting time of growth in our congregation and community. We now have over 1,500 members and average about 580 people annually in worship on Sunday mornings. An average church in the United States can expect to have about 33% of its total membership present on any given Sunday. Our average is closer to 40%.

BUT this means that over half of our membership chooses not to attend each Sunday. And the percentage is much higher when you look at Sunday School, Wednesday night, Bible studies, etc.

Sometimes just showing up can be an important part of our church membership.

C. Gifts

We share our spiritual and financial **gifts** with the church. This is an act of personal discipleship and communal ministry. I have been amazed at how our church family has grown in giving over the past years. Numbers can be boring but they also tell a faith story. In the past decade, the church's general operating budget has DOUBLED! In three capital stewardship campaigns, the congregation has pledged an additional \$6.7 million! This is nothing short of miraculous. I lift up those numbers because I believe they reflect spiritual growth and a commitment to make God's vision our mission.

Statistics tell many different stories, however. We have 1,500 members on roll at Sam Jones. Our 2011 budget is \$1.45 million. If you do the math in your head, this means the average given per member is less \$1,000. If we're a tithing congregation, then this would mean each member has an annual, average income of \$10,000. My sense is that this would be a bit low for most of our members.

I'm not just talking about dollar amounts. Some give faithfully and sacrificially; but there is obviously room for others to grow in the area of financial faithfulness. Think what it would mean to our congregation and community if people took seriously the Biblical call to proportional giving.

We are called to share our material and spiritual gifts with God and others.

D. Service

The fourth promise we make is of service. We are invited to use our time and talents as laborers in God's kingdom. This is another area where our church has grown tremendously during the past years. We have become much more involved in "hands-on" ministry in our community, nation, and world.

If you don't feel adequate to the task, then join all of the Biblical figures who heard the Lord's call. Sometimes God does call the equipped; but oftentimes the Holy

Spirit equips the called. Where is God calling you to serve? Where does your passion and talents intersect with the world's needs?

E. Witness

Four years ago the United Methodist church added a fifth element to our membership vows. We promise to support the body of Christ through our **witness**. Jesus said, *"I am the light of the world."* Jesus also said, *"You are the light of the world."* We are called to shine with God's light in a darkened world.

We are light in a world that prefers darkness. We are salt in a culture on a salt-free diet. We are yeast in a society that ferments the dough. We are the body of Christ—the Lord's hands, feet, and lips.

Joining the Church

I grew up in the church and have served in the full-time ministry for thirty years this coming June. I have seen the power of the church at its very best; and I know the difference a local congregation can make in Christians lives.

A while back, however, I was talking with some fellow clergy about the differences in our society today. People don't have institutional loyalties or join organizations like previous generations did.

One question we discussed was: *"What difference does it make in a person's life whether or not they choose to "officially" join a local congregation?"* We have some long-time members who totally ignore their vow to support the church. And we have other people who have never joined or made these vows, yet they faithfully support God's church in every way.

I'm still in the process of answering this question in my own ministry. Today I invite you to struggle with it as well. What does church membership really mean in our lives? And how does our faith inform our decision to join a church?

To change the setting for a moment, *perhaps* it is the difference between living together and marriage. People who live together are normally in love. However, an unmarried couple only makes promises to one another. In marriage, a couple enters into a sacred covenant not only with one another but also with God in the presence of the community of faith.

In the book, Dr. Mathison wrote: *"Commitment is the starting point of virtually any relationship."* (47) Every covenant is two-sided. God's commitment to us inspires our commitment to God and God's church.

Conclusion

Groucho Marx once resigned from a prominent social club. He wrote to the president: *"Please accept my resignation. I don't care to belong to any club that will accept me as a member!"*

The church is not terribly discriminating about who we let in either. Everyone is invited to become a part of the church universal and particular. As one person put it, *"The*

church is not a museum for saints but a hospital for sinners.” The United Methodist Book of Worship declares: “The church is of God . . . all of every age and station stand in the need of the means of grace which the church alone supplies.”

It is easy to join the church. However, our membership vows call us to a lifetime of discipleship and commitment. When we join this congregation, we promise to support Christ’s church with *“our prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.”*