

The Idolatry of Church
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This morning, I'm wondering if some of you will volunteer. You don't have to, and, in fact, if everyone does it, it's going to be a little crazy. But if some of you will help me out, well, it will make my point a lot clearer.

But it's still going to get a little crazy. Ready?

Will about 10 or 15 of you, back in the back where the red plastic chairs are, will you form a little circle of your chairs — not yet, not yet - when I say go. Form a circle, and then sort of sit there in silence? Who will do this? OK, you are the silent circle.

Then I need some folks who will take out your grey hymnals, maybe you in the back 2 or 3 rows on this side?

Turn to the readings in the back, choose one - any one, something you like, and read it, sort of in a medium voice, out loud to yourself. Not yet - you can pick your reading now, but don't read till I say go.

Then I need about 10 of you or so to stand up - not yet, wait - stand up and stand in aisle. Kind of mill around slowly, listening. Who will do this? OK, be ready.

Then I need about 10 of you to come up on stage and sit, crosslegged, in a circle. Not yet - wait.

Oh, what else? Can we get maybe this section over here to softly hum? Some of you can close your eyes and just be as still as possible. And a few of you can pretend to be eating a meal together.

How about that?

OK, you know your part? We'll do it for about 1 minute.

Ready?

Go.

(Bell rings)

Come on back, everyone. That was a little crazy, I know.

But there's a method to my madness, and I'll explain, by sharing with you some vignettes. Some second-person imaginations.

Imagine with me.

You have come down the trail at night, past the thick trees and watching your step over the roots. It is dark, but the stars shine and the moon is out.

You follow the sound of the songs. And when you get to the clearing, you join the slowly moving circle, counter-clockwise, step, clap, step, clap, sing. Later someone will pray. A story will be told, more than likely it will be the exodus story, "Let my people go". For when you are an enslaved African, worshiping in the brush arbor, in secret, in the lowlands of South Carolina in 1810, "Let my people go" is a good story to tell. This is church.

Another place, another time. You follow the throng into the large stone tower, the most massive building you have ever, or will ever, see. Gathering, standing, in the middle, you barely observe the priests at the front, their backs turned, and speaking and language you don't know, doing something, well, wondrous. When the host is

raised, a tingle of energy runs up and down your spine, and you know you've been to worship.

Another place, another time. A clapboard barn with a small wooden cross out front. You sit on a bench, and sing rousing hymns, the words of Charles Wesley, set to old English drinking songs, maybe. Or the words of Martin Luther, set to old German drinking songs. The preacher, who is also the town's schoolteacher, and grows wheat for the harvest, like every other immigrant out here on the North Dakota prairie, speaks Norwegian, talks for an hour and half about sin and grace, readings passages from St. Paul, explaining what they mean, telling stories of the old country and the new one. The barn was built with your hands, and after the service, you and the children will all have lunch together, then some bible study, before walking home for the rest of the Sabbath.

Another time, another place. Many other times, many other places. In an outdoor courtyard, folks get on their knees, say the prayers together, bow down, kneel down, in surrender to God, the merciful, the compassionate. In a circle of stones, as the sun sets on August 1st, Lammas, halfway between the Summer Solstice and the first day of fall, folks celebrate with a meal of the ripe harvest and joyful company. In an old temple, folks sit cross legged and just breath. In the village square, some dance and chant in costume while children dart in and out.

Many other times, many other places. In a thousand languages, in a billion places, in small groups and large ones, in formal ritual and what looks like chaos, in song and silence with printed words and learned by heart melodies with professional full time leaders and semi-professional part time ones, and with leadership shared,

passed around, all volunteers. With the names of many gods, and none, with goals as diverse as salvation, release, return, harmony, memory, order, creation and more.

This is religious community. Deeply and profoundly various. People gather. In some way, they express their sense of the ultimate and of meaning.

These days, we spend a lot of time talking about the changing world of church. How church life in America is facing a profound revolution. And it is. The numbers are clear. It's a major shift, and the model we have been using of church is not sustainable in its current form. The full time pastor serving a single church with average attendance about 150, its own building and vibrant program and full time professional staff, that model of church, most astute observers believe, will not exist in 20 years.

Maybe 10, maybe 30. But that model is going away. For some denominations of protestantism, it already has.

But guess what? This model of church isn't eternal. Indeed, this model of church is highly unusual. In Christian history, only in North America, and only for less than 80 years, has this been the way of things. In other places and times, the pastor was the schoolteacher or the shop owner or the farmer, the author, the housekeeper, the janitor, the carpenter.

In some traditions - Buddhism, Catholicism, and many others, a small group of folks dedicate themselves to the full-time religious life, with very little resources needed - a shared simple house, a begging bowl and a set of robes.

All the ways I had you gather a moment ago - all those are ways people have worshipped - have done religious community.

Almost 200 years ago, one of our luminaries, Ralph Waldo Emerson - a man who had left the full-time parish ministry to be an author and lecturer, spoke to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School - all Unitarians. The paragraph I read was the second to last of the provocative address, and a vital one - he says, don't throw it out. Breathe new life into old forms. Breathe soul into the church, and it will come alive. As it has through human history, including Christianity, which is, of course, a story about . . . well . . . resurrection.

People were scandalized by Emerson's talk - the latest form of infidelity, as the speaker at the next year's graduation ceremony called it - and it remains a challenging read to this day - for, to breathe soul into old forms, to be guided by spirit instead of tradition, well, that's a little scary.

How do we know what's worth saving and what isn't? And when we've spent our lives, our fortunes, our time building up the form - being professionals, building buildings, creating programs - we've spent our lives doing this, to say, ah, well, time to change - I mean, my lord. I tremble in fear and doubt.

How do we know what part of our community is true and essential and honest and worth saving, and what is a temporary cultural model, built on technologies and economics that no longer hold fast?

That's not a question I have an answer to, by the way.
I don't know.

I think we only find out by trying. By living. By experimenting. By opening our hearts and minds and spirits to the movement of the holy.

What I do know is that the form of the congregation - its budget, its staff, its building, its structure of governance, its programs and classes and methods — all of these are tools. They might be very useful tools. But they are tools. They are not ends in themselves.

I don't know, but sometimes I think churches think, "Well, we'll get some folks together, and then we'll raise some money, and then we'll build a building and get a pastor, and then, voila, we'll have spiritual lives!"

Um, no.
That isn't how it works.

As Emerson said, at their best, the professional religious leader can provoke the listeners into living their own lives of spiritual purpose. But she can't do it for you. A building might hold good programs, and it might invite questions of depth and meaning - if only, as the poet Phillip Larkin said, if only because so many dead lie round, but coming to a church building doesn't make you a better, deeper, or more real person all by itself.

As hard as it might be to admit these things, I think if we consider it carefully we will know it to be true.

The more difficult question, I think, is this one: is religious community itself also just a tool, also a means to

an end - the end of a spiritual life? Or is it worthy on its own?

Which is to say, can you be spiritual all on your own, or do you need other people?

A lot of folks seem to think "all on my own" is just fine. They go out to the woods, they read their book (which was written by someone else, but let's not get too technical here). They have their own esoteric path. They might call themselves: spiritual but not religious. "I don't need the distraction of other people," they say to themselves, "I'll just connect directly with what is holy. There's a lot of that rolling around."

And I get it. Our own Unitarian culture of individualism has fed this illusion, sometimes. But it is an illusion. We are never really alone. We exist with others. And I don't think that community is just a tool. I think it's the point. We are relational beings, and we enact and make real the spiritual life - the love of the holy, the blessings of understanding, the never-ending journey, when we are with others. We might explore out there by ourselves, but we come here to make sense of what we find. We of all ages, sharing what we can. Come sing with me, that we might not journey alone, but together. Religion, spirituality, is what happens when people meet at a deeper level, when our souls and bodies and minds move together gathered in the mystery of this hour

Stay, I said to the cut flowers. They bowed
their heads lower.

Stay, we say, to the form of
church we have known, mostly, for much of our
lives. What has sustained us and what we have

worked for. Stay, we say. And the spirit blows through the windows, and the papers flutter in the wind. The flowers bow their heads, the leaf reddens. No form of a thing stays the same forever. No form of a thing stays the same forever. To worship the form, the tools of a spiritual life, this is false worship. We seek the essence underneath the form. Our temple all space, our creed all truth, its ritual, works of love.

Stay, I said to my loves. Each said, always. There is no always, not of forms. There is no always for temples or mountains or words or bodies. But, I believe, there is an always for love, for spirit, a moving, dancing, changing force. A river, not a rock. Upon this river, we set our raft. Not alone, but together.

I don't know the answers.

But I pray and I hope and I believe that we will figure it out together, through the faithfulness of our living and breathing and being. I know the forms will change, and I tremble before the edge of the unknown. But I know that love will still flow, the spirit will still move, that we can breathe life into these old always changing forms, and that what will come will be different, and that is, really, honestly, OK.

I pray and I hope and I believe that religious community is worth it - worth our time and our gifts and our hope. It is real and true and important. This is a caravan of faith, not despair.

I pray and I hope and I believe that we can let go of what we need to leave behind, that the spirit will draw near, and that what is essential to the human quest for meaning will be found and will find us, somehow, somehow, for all the days to come.