

Churched, Unchurched, Dechurched or Rechurched: What Difference Does It Make?¹

The texts

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. And Joshua said to all the people, “Revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

– Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18

[Jesus said,] “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

When many of his disciples heard it, they said, “This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?” But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, “Does this offend you? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you there are some who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. And he said, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.”

Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, “Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

– John 6:56-69

Introduction

The first of today's Bible readings, from the last chapter of the book of Joshua, seems at first glance to be a stirring report not only about the commitment of Joshua and his family to God but also about the dedication of the whole people of Israel to God. Toward the end of his farewell speech to the Israelites, after admonishing them to put away their old gods, Joshua utters these well-remembered words: "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And the people respond in unison, "Count us in!" Joshua retorts, in the passage that follows our reading, "Perhaps you don't understand what I've said. I'm asking you to choose this day whom you will serve. However, if you choose God but don't fulfill your commitment, it will go very, very badly for you." And the people say, "No, no; we understand. The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey."

Impressive. Moving. Inspirational. Until we turn the page to the next book in the Bible, the book of Judges. And there we read, in the very first chapter, that the people of Israel failed to obey God's clearly articulated will for them and their community. This failure led to centuries of on-again, off-again relations with God, to generations of flirtation with idolatry, even to the temporary loss – through sheer neglect and forgetfulness – of much of their religious heritage.

So what difference does our commitment to God really make, since we so often renege? Let me put the question in terms of how people relate to the church. What difference does it make whether we're regularly churching, totally unchurched, neglectfully or angrily dechurched, or perhaps freshly re-churched? I should think that it might make some difference, but perhaps not as much as one might think. Please permit me to explain.

The commitment that really counts

The first lesson from our biblical heritage about these matters is that it is not our uneven commitment to God that really counts. It is God's enduring commitment to us. Martin Luther's summary of this fundamental truth in his Small Catechism is as good as any ever written:

I believe that I cannot, by my own reason or strength, believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me by his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith.

It is God's initiative that matters, God's promise that makes the difference, God's grace that makes the good in our lives a possibility rather than the evil an inevitability.

Being *churched* does not necessarily mean that one is always in tune and on track with God, the infinity track of engagement and disengagement about which I spoke last week. Some of the most severe criticisms in both the Old and New Testaments are reserved for the temple-goers and the church-gatherers. Some of the hardest hearts and meanest spirits belong to those goers and gatherers who hide their hard hearts and their mean spirits under the guise of piety and righteous indignation, which often turns out to be self-righteous pettiness and annoyance.

Being *unchurched* does not necessarily mean that one is always beyond the pale, always outside of the generous parameters that God sets for meaningful and purposeful lives. As the New Testament makes clear, some of these unchurched folks are closer to the kingdom – the gentle sovereignty of God – than those who flaunt their affiliation with what they regard as God’s gated community: the church.

Being *dechurched* does not necessarily mean that one is on the road to destruction and perdition. It’s better to be an unsatisfied seeker – whose conscience, honesty, and integrity no longer permit her or him to participate in the church – than a sated so-called saint with no qualms, no unanswered questions or no new ideas. I am a pastor and a theologian, a professionally churched person, but I have some understanding of and a lot of empathy for those who have walked away, for those who – whether by intention or through neglect – have become dechurched. There have been times in my life when I could very easily have walked away or, perhaps more to the point, when I have actually been away without walking away.

And finally, being *rechurched* does not necessarily mean the end of troublesome issues, of doubts that may have triggered the dechurching in the first place, or of a lack of full clarity and focus in one’s life. It means a new beginning for life, but not necessarily a complete plan for life. You know my daughter, Kim. She’s rechurched or, perhaps better said, rechurching. And two weeks ago, right here in this place, you heard her agonize over unresolved issues in her life and unclear ideas in her mind. Even St. Paul, though thoroughly churched, once wrote about the ongoing inner conflict between good and evil in his life. Good didn’t always win.

Again, the commitment that really counts is God’s, not ours. The choice that really matters is God’s, not ours. The initiative that really makes a difference is God’s, not ours. Against this backdrop, however, perhaps we can find a few ways in which being churched, unchurched, dechurched or rechurched might have some significance, might make something of a difference.

Commitments that count for something

Today's gospel text from John makes it abundantly clear that discipleship is difficult, that following Jesus means that we may have to give up some dearly held pre-conceptions and pre-conditions. After Jesus' quite lengthy discourse about the bread of life, and on eating and drinking his body and blood, there appeared to be a turning point in his ministry. His teaching suddenly became a stumbling block for many. They thought that his claims represented an *attack on* rather than a *fulfillment of* their tradition. His charisma no longer seemed sufficient. They left. Not yet fully church-ed, they became dechurch-ed.

Being *church-ed* does have some advantages. It gives us a support group. It supplies a channel to transmit teachings and traditions. It provides the main means by which most of us heard the story of Jesus and learned the history of our faith community. And if we were well-church-ed, we came to understand that we would have to grow up in our faith; that the Sunday School version would have to be enhanced and expanded to relate to adult lives in an adult world; that we are pilgrims who have left one home and have not yet attained another; that we are the tent people, not the temple crowd; that our Good Shepherd is ahead of us, inviting us into *his* future, not behind us pushing or beside us assisting us into *our* futures. The commitments to regular hearing of the Word, regular remembrance of our Baptisms, regular participation in the Eucharist, regular gathering for strength and dispersing for service – these commitments, though never perfectly realized, can work wonders even in their imperfect realization. It is good to belong – even to a vagabond group like the church; and to be nurtured – even by nomads called Christians.

Being *unchurch-ed* may have an upside, also. When unchurch-ed people finally do hear and see the story that the church tells and lives, it is not stale to them. They are not drugged by a dulling familiarity. St. Augustine once wrote that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.” The restless unchurch-ed heart is perhaps more penetrable than the heart of the church-ed; the unchurch-ed eye can perhaps see more deeply into the heart of God; the unchurch-ed mind can perhaps add fresh perspective to faith and hope and love.

Being *dechurch-ed* is not entirely negative, either. It could be like an extended sabbatical leave. It could serve as a prelude to re-affiliation with the people of God, a re-upping after some down time. The problem, of course, is that increasing numbers never return. In the 20th century, young adults often dechurch-ed themselves until marriage and family came along. At that point,

the church could count on a high percentage of them rechurched. But no longer. The church has a real challenge today to become a more relevant and compelling movement that will warrant rechurched.

Finally, being *rechurched* has a certain excitement to it. It is part re-discovery and part new discovery. It is, on the one hand, a finding out that what drove us crazy before, when we were churchd, may now make some sense – or may be gone because sufficient numbers in the church recognized its craziness. Being rechurched is, on the other hand, a finding of new truths and new perceptions of old truths. The rechurched, it turns out, are often our most dynamic people and willing workers.

All of these are processes. It would be better to call them churching, unchurching, dechurching, and rechurched. And whatever mode we are in, there are differences among the participants and different stages in our journeys. God calls; we answer. Sometimes haltingly, sometimes irreverently, sometimes even unknowingly. A Roman Catholic theologian once argued that many unchurchd people are “anonymous Christians.” That is, they “get it” about God’s will and purpose for their lives even though they haven’t listened to us – the churchd or the rechurched.

And finally, each of these processes or modes represents some form of commitment: imperfectly implemented, yet counting for something in life; not always consciously made, yet there in the substratum of life.

Conclusion

The series of sermons that I’m preaching this month were advertised under the heading “The meaning of life seen from the end of life.” I have a good pastor friend in Sun City Texas who nearly a decade ago was given two years to live. He’s still alive today. He decided from the outset not to undertake a lonely vigil awaiting his death. He determined rather to find a way to finish life strong and to exit life with some style. And he’s been sharing his experiences and reflections in seminars around the country and most recently in a book he co-authored with a psychologist.

Life looks different to me from the end than it did at the beginning or in the middle. Illusions of immortality are gone. Expectations of others and of myself are not gone but do not loom as large, do not seem as daunting. Thus so are the disappointments: not as great. Still, though the dynamic range of my life may have contracted somewhat, I am extraordinarily happy to have made it to this stage. There is more retrospect than prospect to my life today. Yet the prospect persists, the hope that God has given endures – and not just for the “next” life. My mind may not have quite the edge it once had. But my heart is, hopefully, just a bit larger, my receptivity and responsiveness a

little greater, my sense of God's presence in the world a tad more discerning. Not always, even now; but more often than before. And not by my own strength or commitment, but by God's.

I'll have a few more concluding remarks about looking at life from the end of life to make next week. For now let me share this paragraph, something that I said to the students of Texas Lutheran University in a chapel talk a few years after my retirement:

Don't wait until the end of your career to discover that you got it wrong: that gain – power, prestige, popularity, prosperity, a Porsche – that gain is how you score and win the game of life. It is not gain; it is God. It is not win at any price, by any tactic. It isn't even win some, lose some. It is lose it all and, by the grace of God – I say that not as a vague and pious platitude but as a focused and incarnated principle – by the grace of God, gain God. If you ask me . . . we are beyond repair; we need remanufacture. We need, to use a metaphor both biological and biblical, a rebirth. That rebirth is mediated by baptism, maintained by regular confession and absolution of sin, and manifested in changing lives – not perfect lives, but continuously reorienting lives.

It is not goods that count; it is God. It is not, in the end, our commitment to God that counts; it is God's commitment to us. *Soli Deo gloria*: to God alone the glory. That was the motto of the college where I did my first degree. It is my heartfelt wish that it could serve as an appropriate epitaph to my life upon my death. *Soli Deo gloria*: not my will; not my mind; not my heart; not my strength; not my choice; not my commitment; not my doctrine; not my doings or achievements. To God alone the glory. It's as close as I come to having a mantra in my life. *Soli Deo gloria*. Amen.

¹ Presented by Tom Wilkens at Peace Lutheran Church in Charlottesville, VA, on 08/22/09 and 08/23/09.