

At our Session retreat a few weeks ago, the elders of this church discussed four scenarios. Four types of people and their relationship with God and with organized religion. Tomorrow night the Session is meeting again to follow up on this conversation and we will continue our conversation about how to connect with each of these four types of people.

I am going to describe each of these four types and as I do this I invite you to ask yourself which of these types are you. These four categories come from the work of John Roberto. You will fit into one of these categories. But then I will describe three other categories of people and I invite you to think about your friends and neighbors. Who do you know that fits into the other 3 categories?

The first category I describe is the one which just about all of us will say is us. The first category are people who have a hunger for knowing God and are active in a local church. The first category are people who have a hunger for God and are active in a local church. Most of us here would describe ourselves this way because we are here in this place on a Sunday morning. I will call this group "Active Church Goers." ACGs

Active Church Goers or ACGs are people who feel that they grow spiritually by being active in a local church. I was raised by my parents to be an ACG. There was no choice in my family. It was who we were. There was never a question about what we did on Sunday morning.

Sunday morning was spent attending Sunday School and worship at the Trinity Presbyterian Church on the eastern edge of Columbia. It was in the red chairs and pews of that church where I learned about the faith and it was there that I developed my sense that God called me into service. And I have continued to find faith formation in a local church.

The majority of us here would describe ourselves as ACGs. You have decided that the place where your faith is nurtured is as a part of a Christian church. You are in this church because you were raised here or you moved nearby or you found a place here that seemed to mesh with what you sensed was important. Most of us describe ourselves as Active Church Goers or ACGs.

The second category I describe are similar to ACGs. The second category are what are commonly called Chreasters or C&E Christians. Chreasters is a word which combines Christmas and Easter. C&E are the first letters of Christmas and Easter. The second category are people who are open to organized religion but have a low hunger for God.

They are called Chreasters or C&E Christians because you will usually find them in a church around Christmas and Easter and occasionally during other times of the year. The organized church is important to them but they do not find much faith formation in the church.

I am reminded of a conversation I had with someone who was an active Catholic. He described for me attending mass and when it was time to come forward to receive mass a jogger always entered from the rear. This jogger timed his jogging route so that he would arrive at the church in time to come forward, have the priest share with him the bread and wine, and then the jogger would depart out the side door and continue his run, never even breaking stride.

The third category of people are what I am calling Hermits. Hermits do not care to get to know God and have a very low opinion of the church. They reject all forms of organized religion and have no desire to be around church people. The image I have is the crusty older guy who lives on the lake or the young adult who looks forward to a couple of days off from work so that she can spend more time on social media or so that he can play more video games.

The fourth type of person is the often described Spiritual but Not Religious. Sometimes called SBNRs. These are folks who do not find spiritual fulfillment inside traditional churches but may find that fulfillment through activities such as yoga, hunting, or maybe fishing. SBNRs will be found making spiritual connections with people through social media and leading social causes in the community.

SBNRs may be people who grew up in the church but found themselves turned off by the politics found in churches. They find God in nature walks or through reading certain authors. Reading the Bible may be very important to them.

I share all of this to invite all of us into the conversation that the Session is having about what it means to share the good news of Jesus Christ and how we need to see ourselves as missionaries that need to learn the culture where we are called to serve and share the message.

I read a wonderful sermon this week by one of my former professors, Walter Brueggemann. Walter uses the biblical image of the potter and the clay pot to talk about the church. In this sermon he says the church is the clay pot and the good news in the message that the clay pot contains.

But Walter accuses the church of being too focused on protecting the pot and not being focused on the treasure of good news that is inside. He says that as long as we spend all of our energy on the container that we miss the treasure of good news that we have to share and to receive.

The Session is going to be spending a lot of their time this year in seeking to understand people who are in the other three scenarios than active church people. We will be spending a lot of time seeking to listen to the Spiritual but Not Religious, the Hermits who want nothing to do with the church, and the Chreasters who show up at Christmas and Easter.

But even though the Session is going to be spending a lot of time and energy learning about and getting to know people outside of active church goers, there are still lots of needs that need to be cared for within the church. And that is where our passage today gives us some guidance.

We have been studying the New Testament book of Acts. Acts is a book which contains the stories from when the early Christians were trying to form the church. We are reading through Acts to help us here at Allison Creek as we start afresh as a church community that is coming out of a difficult time. But the difficulties of our past provide us an opportunity to look at Scripture with a new set of eyes. Acts is a great place to begin.

In the Scripture we read today, Greek speaking Jewish Christians are complaining that the Aramaic speaking Jewish Christians are neglecting the poor and widowed. So what we have here is a good ole church fight about priorities. So the 12 apostles respond by calling everyone together. They give a challenge to the people and tell them that the 12 apostles cannot do everything.

The 12 share with the rest of the church that they have gifts of discernment but that others need to step up to care for the needs of the church community including the poor among them. As a result of this challenge, 7 men are chosen as the first deacons. These 7, including Stephen, step up to do the important work of caring for the poor and lonely in their own community. Because these 7 stepped up and accepted this calling, the word of God continued to spread and the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem.

So let's now turn this onto us. Like I shared, this is a year when your Session is going to be pushed to think outside the box and explore new ways of being church. This is a year when your Session is going to be invited into conversations that are going to have a big impact on the future of this community of faith. But as they venture out and explore what God is calling them to be open to, we cannot and we will not forget about the needs of people within this community of faith now. And that is where the rest of us need to step up and fulfill your calling.

In our zeal to share the good news outside of ourselves we cannot forget the widows and the other needs of this community. But the responsibility to care for the physical and emotional and spiritual needs of the congregation cannot rest on the shoulders of the Session. As this text from Acts points out, church leaders cannot do it all. This church needs people to act like deacons and care for folks within this congregation.

So the Session needs you to continue to step up by sending cards to shut-ins, we need you to continue to teach Sunday School, we need you to continue to fix toilets and trim shrubbery and replace windows, we need you to continue to send food to PATH, we need you to continue to meet for Bible study and put together fun activities and make sure the monies are properly counted and sing in the choir and play in the band and volunteer at bluegrass and on and on and on.

Listen to this text from Acts. Do not look to your Session and to your pastor to be your Saviors. We are human beings capable of only doing so much. We are not your Saviors. I invite you to let Jesus Christ be your Savior. You are invited to complain to us about what needs are being overlooked but only complain if you are willing to be part of the solution.

Stephen and the other 6 became the deacons who were called upon to serve the needs within the congregation. We may not officially have deacons in this congregation. But I invite you to ask yourself if you are being called to serve God by caring for some segment within this congregation as well.

If you see something that is not being tended to I invite you to ask yourself if the reason you are seeing it is because God wants you to respond. AMEN.

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-Text: Acts 6

-Given: January 25, 2015 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)