

## **We Choose Community**

R.G. Wilson-Lyons

In seminary, one of my field placements was at a small town church about 70 miles east of Raleigh in Princeton, North Carolina—Princeton United Methodist Church. It maybe had around 100 people who worshipped there, but the church had a reputation. My field ed supervisor told me that this was a “difficult” church. They had a lot of conflicts. They went through pastors quickly, meaning they were so difficult, that ministers couldn’t stand it for very long. And they weren’t very welcoming to outsiders.

Things got off to a rocky start. After my first Sunday there, the pastor that requested a seminary intern in the first place took a leave of absence because of some really difficult family challenges. A retired minister, Pastor Lewis, was asked to fill in the void. Pastor Lewis invited me to meet with him the following week. “R.G., I know this is not the best way to start an internship. I wanted you to know that I’m here to help you. But I also want you to work with me. This church has some problems – I’m sure you know that. But I don’t believe there isn’t anything here that a little love can’t fix.”

And my goodness, did he set an example. I’ve never seen a pastor visit people in their homes as much as Pastor Lewis did. Sometimes, he would even beat family members to the hospital when their loved one was being admitted. And he was right. It turns out love is contagious. The congregation started loving each other...I mean really loving each other. Younger people would show up at older members house to cut their grass. Pies randomly appeared on doorsteps. And all this conflict that I had heard so much about seemed to wash away.

There was a man in the church named Rodney who had a 12 year old son. Rodney, though, had been having some health issues that he couldn’t explain. It turns out he had brain cancer and ended up being scheduled to have brain surgery. Now Pastor Lewis believed in praying for healing and anointing sick people with oil. I mean he really believed in it. He carried oil with him everywhere he went in case he needed to anoint someone as he asked God to heal them. At the end of each service, he offered a time where anyone could come to the altar, receive oil and be prayed over for whatever sickness, challenge, or struggle they may be experiencing. And this was popular. It was really popular. Every week, people would go down and receive oil and prayers for healing.

I have to confess that I tended to roll my eyes at this sort of thing. Pastor Lewis really believed that the oil and the prayer could heal people. It all seemed so anti-intellectual to me...being a seminary student who thought he knew everything. I could see that it was meaningful to the people, and that was fine, but this would never be something I would find meaningful I thought. But the Sunday before Rodney’s surgery the next day, as Pastor Lewis opened up the altar for oil and prayers for healing, an older man in the church, a man with arthritis so severe that he could hardly walk, stood up. Every time I had ever heard this man speak, his voice seemed so weak and timid, but this time he belted out in a voice that got everyone’s attention, “I want to be anointed on behalf of Rodney.”

He slowly made his way to the altar, every step painful. He insisted on kneeling down at the altar even as it took one person on each side of him to help him to make sure he didn't fall. And Pastor Lewis anointed him with oil and said, "O God we pray for healing for our dear brother Rodney." And before I realized it, I was crying.

I've been thinking a lot about the question that this sermon series poses, "Why church?" In a time of declining church attendance and membership, "Why does church still matter?" Or more specifically to stewardship time, "Why does church matter enough for me to ask you to give of your money and your time to support it?"

Now I would love to answer that question with, "It matters because you get to hear incredible sermons." If that were the answer, that would make me feel pretty good about myself right. But the truth is that any of you can listen to inspiring sermons or incredible speakers any time you want online, people who are far better speakers than I could ever hope to be. Or I often thought that church mattered because we have moving, beautiful music. We do. This church is so incredibly fortunate to have someone with the talent, skill, and commitment of Matthew. Our soloists could perform in any venue in the Boston area and people would pay to see them. And our choir is phenomenal. But any of us can go to a concert at the Boston Opera house or find beautiful sacred music on the internet. This is not the only place where you can find beautiful music.

We live in an on demand world. If you're looking for good preaching, you can find it without being a part of a church. If you're looking for beautiful music, you can find it without being a part of a church. In fact, if you have a smart TV, you can pretty much find anything we offer by simply clicking your remote while you relax on your couch.

Why does church still matter?

And the more I think about that question, the more I think the answer is not in what we offer but in who we are. Don't get me wrong. Worship is important. You will continue to hear amazing music each week. I will do my best to offer meaningful sermons for you. But the reason church matters is not so much what you get when you come here but rather it is because church offers us an invitation to live in the world a little differently.

Last week, Martha preached about how in a world of cynicism, the invitation of church is that we cling relentlessly to hope. This week, we are invited to remember that in a world that prioritizes individualism, we choose community. Church still matters because here in this space we know that we are indeed one another's keeper. We know that what someone else is going through, even if it doesn't individually affect us, matters.

The early church that we read about in Acts emphasized community so much that they even relinquished private ownership. Hear the words of the writer one more time, "No one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common...there

was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.”

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What an amazing community, right? If anyone was in need, then that was not an individual need, it was a community need and the community would work together to meet it. That’s who we are called to be as a church. Your needs are my needs and my needs are your needs. We are all in this together.

But I know what you’re probably thinking. “Yeah, that’s well and good. I’m glad the early church did that. But we are pretty far removed from the early church. Do you know some of the conflict we’ve had lately? And it’s not just our church. From what I can tell, church is a place of individualism and selfishness, just like the rest of the world.”

If you’re thinking that, you’re not wrong. The Church – not just our church – but all churches often fails to live up to those things we claim to believe. But guess what, the early church didn’t always live up to those ideals either. It wasn’t always this incredible image of generosity and community that the writer of Acts wants to portray. Paul got into a shouting match with Peter. Some of the early church leaders decided they simply could not work together and they went their separate ways.

You know, the early church would often refer to each other as brother or sister and I think we hear that and think, “Oh how wonderful. They must have always loved each other so much.” And I want to respond to whoever thinks that, “Well you must have never had a brother or a sister.”

I have a brother and I love my brother more than anyone other than my wife and daughters. But growing up there were times when we fought tooth and nail. In fact, my brother is the only person to whom I have ever said the words, “I hate you.”

But here’s the thing, no matter what, he was still my brother. No matter how angry I was, no matter how much we had fought, we knew that we were going to do life together.

Being a part of a community doesn’t mean life is always easy. In fact, being a part of a community is really hard work and there are times when we may not want anything to do with each other. There are times when the message that we hear all around us, the message that says just take care of you and yours, is really appealing. But that’s not who we are. In a world of individualism, we cling to community – even when it’s hard, even when its messy, even when we’re mad as all get out because deep down we know that we are in this together.

That church back in North Carolina that I served as an intern was not what anyone would consider an ideal church. As I said, it had a reputation. But even so, they understood that when

Rodney was diagnosed with cancer, the whole community would rally around him and his family.

Friends, from the summer of 2020 through the summer of 2021, I found myself for the first time in fifteen years not serving as a full time pastor of a church. Because youth group met on Sunday evenings, I suddenly had my Sunday mornings free for the first time in a long time. And you know what. I liked it. And if you promise not to tell anyone, sometimes, I didn't watch the live stream worship. But as the year wore on, I realized that something was missing. It wasn't John's sermons, as good as they were. It wasn't even the music, though I certainly felt inspired every time I heard it. Turns out, it was you. It was being an active part of a community that has promised to love each other, to pray for each other, to support each other in whatever way we can.

That's why I continue to believe that what we do matters, that what we do is not only worth being a part of but worth giving of our time and our energy and, yes, our money to support. Friends, the beauty of church is that none of us are ever alone. Your needs become my needs and my needs become your needs. And no matter what any of us faces, we will have a whole church behind us. Why does church still matter? Because here, in this place, we are always in it together.

Amen.