

# DON'T GIVE UP ON THE INSTITUTION!<sup>1</sup>

Mark 1: 21-28

A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens

February 1, 2009

I believe in Christ, but I just can't handle church!+ Have you ever heard that? Have you ever said or felt that? Most of us know the feeling. Some people are choosing to become free-range Christians, unconnected to any congregation, full of cynicism toward all things institutional. Today I want to address those who are tempted to live life apart from the frustrations and sometimes melodrama that come with involvement in a local church.

I

The first thing I want to say is that I understand. We all understand! Anyone who has ever taken church seriously and been involved deeply in the life of a local congregation understands. Ever get disillusioned? Angry? Hurt? Burned out? Check, check, check, and check!

We all know people who have given up on church entirely. They feel bruised and abused, and they have concluded that it's just not worth the hassle. They would much rather sleep late and curl up on Sunday morning

---

<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, February 1, 2009.

to read the paper. These friends are part of a culture defined by individualism. For some, the very word "institution" has a bad connotation.

Sometimes I wish we could gather all these good people together and say, "Look, we understand. We know what it is like to have questions, to doubt, to look with suspicion on anything that smacks of organized religion. We know what it is like to be embarrassed by some people in the church. We know what it is like!"

## II

And yet, here we are! Why? Why do we invest our time and money and energy into this beautiful mess of a community with all its warts and stains?

This week there was a wonderful op-ed piece in the New York Times by David Brooks entitled "What Life Asks of Us." It was about institutional thinking. He quoted Ryne Sandberg's address when he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Here is what Ryne Sandberg said about the institution of baseball:

*I was in awe every time I walked onto the field. That's respect. I was taught you never, ever disrespect your opponents or your teammates or your organization or your manager and never, ever your uniform....*

Then Sandberg motioned to those inducted before him: *These guys sitting up here did not pave the way for the rest of us so that players could swing for the fences every time up and forget how to move a runner over to third. It's disrespectful to them, to you and to the game of baseball that we all played growing up.*

*Respect. A lot of people say this honor validates my career, but I didn't work hard for validation. I didn't play the game right because I saw a reward at the end of the tunnel. I played it right because that's what you're supposed to do, play it right and with respect.... If this validates anything, it's that guys who taught me the game...did what they were supposed to do, and I did what I was supposed to do.<sup>2</sup>*

After quoting Sandberg's speech, David Brooks said that he tries to keep a list of those in public life he admires the most, and when he looks at that list he realizes that invariably it is composed of people who have immersed themselves in their institutions. They have respected the sacrifices of those who built those institutions and have done their part to maintain the health and vitality of the very institutions that have blessed their lives.

---

<sup>2</sup> New York Times, January 27, 2009, p. A31.

In a culture of individualism and personal fulfillment, let the church stand up and say, "Institutions matter! Church matters! And we will do what it takes to nurture the health of this institution!+

### III

This is where I want to refer you to the biblical text we read from the gospel of Mark. This is Mark's account of how Jesus got his whole enterprise off the ground. He had gathered around him a few devoted followers: Peter and Andrew, James and John, and soon a few others. They were very ordinary people. It was an unostentatious beginning.

Then the very first thing Jesus did was to enter the institution of the synagogue and participate in its gathering. Surely he knew of the institutional slowness to accept change. Surely he was aware of the personality conflicts, the weaknesses of the local clergy, the failures of the past, and the intricacies of the committee structure. But he chose to begin his ministry, not in opposition to the institution, but as a part of the institution. He did not give up on the synagogue! At the very outset of his ministry, at the beginning of a religious revolution, he chose to go through the ordinary gathering of the people of faith. He did not give up on the institution.

Friends, some of you have been deeply involved in the life of the church much longer than I have, but after four decades of leading churches as pastor and teaching in the church's seminaries, I can say two things. First, I know how imperfect the church is. I know from personal experience how far we all have to go and how much I yearn for the church to be more progressive, more involved, more educated, more committed to justice. I know those things!

But the second thing I can say is that after all these years I love the church and know that my place is always in it. In spite of my knowledge of all the imperfections of the church, I have seen the poor fed, the despondent given hope, the lonely brought into community, the truth spoken courageously to power, the broken healed, the grieving comforted, the sick visited, failures forgiven, believers baptized, the dead buried with honor, babies dedicated, children nurtured, youth inspired, hope rekindled, sacred promises made, courage sustained, and people changed for the better! We can all think of other organizations that do bits and pieces of that, but nothing that does everything that God is doing in and through the church.

Surely God is not confined to the church. God is free to work not only through other organizations, but also through other religions and through

no religion at all. But whatever else God is up to in this world, wherever else God is working in this world, we believe that it is God's intention to build a redeemed community following the Way of Christ, making a difference in the world beginning in this place on the corner of Park and Salisbury in Worcester, MA, North America, planet earth, in the year 2009.

#### IV

Carlyle Marney once said that the church that has not lost its courage will never have to advertise its location.<sup>3</sup> Whether involved in church or not, people in this community know our location, not because it is prestigious, but because this congregation has not lost its courage. Time and again, we have struggled with difficult questions and resolved to have the courage to love.

And we have done this as a leading, tall-steeple, flagship church. Many flagship churches just like to wave the flag, follow what is popular, stay close to the shore, and never launch out into the deep. Not the First Baptist Church of Worcester. For nearly 200 years people have known the exact address of this church: we are the institution at the corner of Courage and Love.

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Stephen Shoemaker, % Community of Disciples, unpublished sermon manuscript.