

“The Amateurs”

Acts 2:1-21

Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville

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Back in the year 1675, just nine years after the terrible London fire had devastated so much of that city, Sir Christopher Wren laid the cornerstone of what was to be his most ambitious undertaking:

the rebuilding of St. Paul’s Cathedral.

He worked on the project for more than 35 years, from 1675-1710, and it is said that he poured more of his genius into this edifice than any other building he ever designed.

Now there’s a story—it may be apocryphal, it’s impossible to say—but the story goes that when the project was finally completed, and Sir Christopher himself was an old man, he gave a personal tour to the reigning monarch, Queen Anne.

When it was over, he waited with baited breath for her reaction.

The Queen used three adjectives to sum up her feelings about Sir Christopher’s work:

“It is awful, it is artificial, it is amusing.”

Can you imagine how Sir Christopher must have felt?

This magnificent structure was his “magnum opus”—

and the one opinion that mattered most to him comes out:

AWFUL, ARTIFICIAL, AMUSING?!

But Sir Christopher Wren is said to have responded not with dejection, but with gratitude and relief! He sank to his knees and thanked her majesty for her graciousness.

Why?

Because...back in 1710, the word “awful” meant “awe-inspiring,”
and the word “artificial” meant “artistic,”
and the word “amusing” meant “amazing.”¹

Whether or not that story is true, what is true is that words, and their meanings, can change over time.

Just take the subject of our sermon for today.

We are continuing our sermon series for the spring, Then and Now: What does the early church [back then] have to teach those of us in the Church [right now]?

And our topic today...is being an amateur.

What does the word amateur mean?
Most of us think of the word as meaning “less than.”
The OPPOSITE of professionals, right?

There’s even something critical or condescending in the way that the word amateur is often used: “Oh, that was an amateurish move...”

But it hasn’t always been that way.
Do you know where the word comes from?
It comes from the Latin word for “love.”

The deeper meaning of the word amateur—
is doing something for the love of it,
because you take delight in it.

¹ As told by John R. Claypool in his sermon, “Amateurism, God, and Ourselves,” in his book, *God Is an Amateur*, Cincinnati, OH: Forward Moving Publications, 1994.

To be an amateur is to be so passionate about what one is doing...it's the sheer joy of the act that serves as the motivating force.

All of which leads me to what happened at Pentecost long ago.

When God's Church was born, to whom did God send the Holy Spirit?

Not professionals.
God chose a bunch of amateurs.

Look at Peter.
Peter preaches his first sermon at Pentecost.
No previous experience, mind you, from the pulpit.

But after the Holy Spirit arrives with tongues of fire, Peter stands up, and he preaches a sermon, and do you remember what the response to that sermon was? According to Luke, about 3,000 people were baptized and joined God's Church because of what Peter preached that day!

You see, Peter was an amateur.
Not just because he'd never done something like that before.

But because of his love for God,
and his passion for the gospel,
and the joy that he took in being part of the faith
community that was being born that day...

I wonder if all that has something to teach us about why we're here today.

Why are you here today?

Hold that question. We'll return to it in a moment.

Earlier this year, the Pew Research Center published their most recent findings about “nones”—those people who claim no religious affiliation in our country. “Nones” now comprise the largest single group in the religious landscape of the United States at 28%...²

Larger than evangelical Christians.

Larger than Roman Catholics.

And I get it.

The Church is often not so easy to love.

There are times when being part of a faith community irritates us, or wounds us, or bores us...and in the competitive marketplace of how we spend our time, it can be easy to ask, on any given Sunday:

Why bother? Why bother with church?

It reminds me of something I read on Facebook a few years ago.

The author was Tara Woodard-Lehman.

The title of her post: “Do You Really Need Church?”

“Not long ago I was having a conversation with a college student. Like many young adults, this guy was a religious ‘none’.... And...he found my commitment to ‘traditional religion’ quite curious.

“I mean, I get why you’re into ‘being spiritual’ and ‘helping people’ and everything, but why bother with Church?”

² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/01/24/religious-nones-in-america-who-they-are-and-what-they-believe>.

“He went on to describe how irrelevant the Church was. In his view, all the Church once provided can be found elsewhere in civic life.

“From community service projects to book clubs;
from outreach to the poor to...meditation groups
to support groups...

Why bother with Church at all?

Or as Tara Woodard-Lehman puts it:

“Why don’t I just hit the bagel shop, join another yoga class...and volunteer at a soup kitchen every once in a while?”

But then, she goes on to say the following:

“After giving it much consideration, I’ve decided that there is at least one very good reason why I need Church: I have a really bad memory....

“Especially when it comes to remembering who I am as a child of God. Especially when it comes to remembering what God has done, and continues to do, in and through Jesus Christ.

“...there are a gazillion other demands and voices
that are vying for my attention all the...time.

“So...I get tired. And I get distracted.
And more often than not, I forget.

“I forget who I am. I forget who God is.
I forget God’s Epic Story of Redemption...
and Beauty and Hope.

“I still practice yoga...

“But it’s no replacement for hearing God’s Story, read and proclaimed, week after week. I need Church, because Church reminds me of everything that’s important.

“And when I say Church...I mean the people...I’m talking about the beautiful but undeniably imperfect community of people who help me remember who I am, and to Whom I belong, over and over again.”³

I think Tara Woodard-Lehman had it exactly right.
You know who else has a poor memory sometimes?
Yours truly.

Just last Sunday, I was getting ready for worship in my office.

Then I started visiting with many of you, out in the Atrium, before worship began. Then I went into the waiting sacristy, and Mary Kathleen reviewed the service with everyone who was leading in worship that day.

And it was a glorious day.
Over 30 confirmands recognized in worship last Sunday.

It wasn’t until worship was over and I was getting ready to go home that something dawned on me...the pre-worship Session meeting. Every Sunday, our Session meets for about 5 minutes, prior to the start of worship, to take care of any routine business and share prayer concerns.

³ Tara Woodard Lehman’s article came from the Huffington Post and can be found at [Do You Really Need Church? | HuffPost Communities](#).

I've been moderating those pre-worship Session meetings for almost six years now. And guess who forgot to show up to moderate the pre-worship Session last Sunday!

How did I forget?

I have no idea how I forgot.

Thankfully, Lauren was on hand and took care of everything.

I just know that this is why I need the Church.

Because when it comes to remembering things even more important than a pre-worship Session meeting, questions like who I am and whose I am...I need the Church.

I need each of you.

I need a bunch of amateurs—in that older sense of the word.

Not people paid to do it, or made to do it.

I need people who are here because of their love for God and their commitment to Christ's grace, and sharing that grace with our neighbors, no matter the cost...and I need a community that's dedicated to being the body of Christ in the world:

walking with the poor,

working for justice,

taking joy in the job that God has given us to do.

It's a powerful thing, right?

To see someone do what they do...

not because they're paid to do it,

and not because they're made to it,

but simply because of the joy—

the delight they take in doing it.

Have you ever seen that before?

I saw something like that just this past week on our high school's baseball field.

The team's season just ended.

The coach gathered the team together out in left field.

Spoke with the players just like he always did.

But then, after he finished...instead of walking back to the dugout with the rest of the team, a couple of the seniors split off from the rest of the team...and two or three of them just started walking through the outfield grass.

Just one more time.

Cleats in the grass.

Smell of the field.

They knew it was their last time in a uniform on that field.

More than one parent had a tear in their eye.

It was a poignant moment.

What did that moment represent?

Years of practice, yes.

Sadness at saying goodbye...that too.

But deeper than all that, before the sadness at saying goodbye, I submit that the walk through the outfield grass came from a place of joy. The delight that those young men had taken in a game that they loved to play, since before they were in kindergarten...they were amateurs.

Not paid to do it.
Not made to do it.
But taking great joy in using the gifts they were given...

Have you ever seen it?
Not just in a high school athlete's life, but in the Christian life?

Offering hospitality to the stranger.
Extending generosity to a neighbor.
All because you delight in doing it!

It's not just a powerful thing.
It can be a life-changing thing.

When the Civil Rights activist and recently retired preacher, William Barber, II, was growing up, his family moved from Indianapolis back to his father's hometown of Roper, North Carolina.

His father, William Barber, Sr., was a formative influence on his son. William Barber, II's father "could have taught at a...university but answered the call to integrate public schools in the south. He could have been a big-steeple preacher, but preached on the side in tiny rural churches of the Disciples of Christ."

But moving to Roper did not just mean a change for William Barber, Sr. It also meant change for his son.

William Barber, II would now get to spend a lot more time with his father's mother—his grandmother.

And William Barber, II "cherished his paternal grandmother, who...was the spiritual anchor in the family. Every Sunday, she visited shut-ins after church."

She would say to her grandson:

“We’ll be back shortly. We’ve got to go hope somebody.”

For years, her grandson William thought that she mistook the word ‘hope’ for ‘help,’ as in, “We’ve got to go help somebody.”

Only later did he realize that she said EXACTLY what he had heard her say.

“...he realized that ‘hoping’ others in Christ was precisely how his grandmother survived,” how she was determined [to live with joy, each and every day,] amidst the racism that had dominated her life.”⁴

In other words, Barber’s grandmother—who had a profound influence on her grandson’s faith—

she couldn’t help but HOPE somebody,
out of her joy for living the gospel,
and her love for God’s Church.

Have you ever seen it happen in Church?

Let me ask you a question:

Why are you here today?

How many of you are here because of the parking?

How many of you are here because someone in your family made you come?

How many of you are here because God has delighted in you?

⁴ I am indebted to two sources for this story: “William Barber’s Life of Struggle,” by Gary Dorrien, in *Commonweal*, October 8, 2023, and Tom Long’s article, “The Shock of Easter,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2024.

And in your baptism, God has called you and claimed you to be a
part of what the Holy Spirit started...
at Pentecost...
all those years ago.

The Spirit is here today, my friends.
And it's on the move. It's got you....

When worship is over today, go hope somebody.

Amen.