

What the Church Has to Offer the World in 2024

Based on Genesis 2:18-22, Romans 12:3-8, & Hebrews 10:24-25

A Message Offered by Toby Jones to the People of ChxUCC on May 12, 2024

Last Sunday, we began this month-long series on challenges and changes facing today's church, and we did so by looking at some of the very real barriers that keep so many people from coming to churches like ours. Today, we're going to consider what it is that we have to offer people in today's increasingly isolated and divided world.

When I look back over my 62 years of life in America, one of the developments I can't help but recognize is the decay of our public, shared life. Growing up in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio in the 60s and 70s, so much was shared in communities. Parks and playgrounds, for instance, were communal experiences. Our little town of Bay Village had 4-5 playgrounds, most of which were at the various elementary schools. Swing sets, teeter-tauters, slides, sandboxes – all the things that young kids loved. Our parents and baby-sitters would take us to these wide-open play areas, and we'd share the equipment with others, making friends as we did so. Meanwhile, the moms would make friends with other moms who were also taking advantage of these public, shared playgrounds. But by the time I was out of college and graduate school, I couldn't help but notice that swing sets, slides, and teeter-tauters we're starting to spring up in people's fenced-in back yards, a kind of privatization of what had previously been shared and public.

Similarly, one of my favorite things to do as a child was to go to the movies with my friends and family. We'd sit in this huge, dark, public room with cushy Valeur seats, having the communal experience of watching a newly released film with a hundred other people from our community. We had to learn to be quiet, respectful, and learn to not interrupt others as we had this collective, shared experience. But by the time I'd finished seminary, everyone had these contraptions called VCR's, and they'd rent movies to watch on their own, in private. In his 1995 bestseller *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam argued that this move to private television and film viewing and everyone having their own private playgrounds "eroded social and political capital by... weakening group attachments and social/political commitment."

Of course, the explosion of the internet and the personal computer further fragmented and privatized American society, right? We no longer needed to go the public library to do research or access reference texts. And once Amazon and

the other “order-from-and-deliver-to-your-home” companies took over, we hardly had to leave our homes at all anymore. And once the Covid-19 Pandemic took over, the privatization of most EVERYTHING in our lives became an accepted, permanent feature of American life.

Now, social scientists and psychotherapists, of course, couldn't help but notice that something else was happening in our society right alongside this tidal wave of privatization. There was a huge escalation in depression, isolations, suicide, drug and alcohol addiction, family violence, gun violence, and political extremism. People felt cut off and no longer connected to anything real, anything supportive, anything communal. We see the undeniable effects of all this isolation most profoundly in our children and in our elderly. None of us is immune. And all the way back in 1995, Robert Putnam was prophetic when he wrote, “People divorced from community, occupation, and association are first and foremost among the supporters of extremism.” But with all due respect to Robert Putnam and his groundbreaking work in 1995, there was Someone who came to this conclusion a long time before he did. That was Yahweh who said, all the way back in Genesis 2, “It is not good for man to be alone...” All of this privatization, all of this pulling away from public, shared life...it's not good.

So, that brings us to what a church like ours has to offer to those struggling to fend off depression, isolation, addiction, and even extremism in today's broken and dysfunctional world. Again, in *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam claimed that, “Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of positive social capital in America.” “The church is people,” said Reverend Craig McMullen. “It's not a building; it's not an institution, even. It is relationships between one person and the next.” This is clearly why the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews said, “We must not give up the habit of meeting together, as some have begun to do. But we must encourage one another more and more.” (Hebrews 10:25)

Remember when we couldn't meet together during Covid? Remember how frustrating and isolating that was? Folks, that is how all of life is all the time for so many of our brothers and sisters out there in the world. Many of them don't even realize it. I'm sure you've had plenty of conversations with relative and friends who say, “I can get much closer to God out in the woods or in my kayak out in the water than I can in a church.” And while I love nature and derive as much peace from being outdoors as anybody, such an escape does not offer life-giving, sustaining community. It wasn't Jesus's intention.

The story is told of a man named Ralph, who had sort of checked out of his church. His pastor would still go over and visit him at his house from time to time. Somehow their conversation always worked its way to this same point, where the pastor would say that the church family missed Ralph and he should come back, and Ralph would always say that he was fine on his own with God. One winter afternoon, the pastor showed up at Ralph's, and he had a fire going in his fireplace. And right about the time that Ralph said the usual thing about being fine on his own, the pastor reached into the burning coals with the iron tongs and pulled out a single, red-hot coal. He set it down on the concrete floor over in front of Ralph's feet. The two continued their conversation for a while. The once red coal was ashened over with gray, its red heat dissipating. A tiny, decreasing trail of smoke rose from it. A couple of awkward minutes later, it was completely out, a lump of gray, while the fire burned on. The pastor looked at Ralph, looked at that lone gray lump by his feet, and said, "Well, I guess that's about it then." He tipped his hat, and walked out the door.

People need the sustaining warmth, love, support and communal involvement of a faith community. Hebrews 10:24 urges us to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds." In Romans 12, Paul compares the church to a human body with different parts, each of which has a vital function to the whole. The point is that we need each other, AND we are better with each other. You know what isn't apt to happen for that person who says he/she feels closer to God out in the woods or on the golf course? Doing good for other people...making the world a better place for others. Robert Putnam's research showed that "nearly half of all philanthropy is religious in character, and nearly half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context." People who live isolated, fragmented lives, divorced from a church or spiritual community are far less likely to plug into the world in a meaningful way to make it better. And, studies show, they, themselves, are far less likely to feel content and fulfilled in their lives.

A friend of mine works at a university with a lot of music students. He noticed one young man had stopped showing up to one of the school's vocal ensembles. After a couple of weeks, my friend got worried and went over to the student's dorm to check in on him. The young man was in his bed, just lying there, staring at the ceiling. He told my friend that he'd gone off his meds and just couldn't get out of bed, didn't think he could go on. When my friend asked why he wasn't taking the meds, the student said they were too expensive, and he couldn't even afford the co-pay. My friend went over to the health center, learned of a grant that would cover such costs, got the student going on his meds

again. Then he invited him to come play his instrument with this ensemble that could really use his talent. The kid started coming, started smiling and enjoying himself. Participation in that group revived him, encouraged him, put his gift back to work for others. You might say that my friend on the faculty put this young man's individual burned-out coal back into the fire, and it reignited him.

That's pretty much what Jesus did, when you think about it. He roamed the streets and alleys of Galilee and Capernaum and found those individual, ashen gray coals and managed to set them back into the life-giving fire of community. The challenge facing our church is that there are too many individual coals out there who have no heat source anymore, no life-source. There are people in this community who have retired, who don't have the community of their workplace anymore. They don't feel as important or as necessary as they once did. Their lives and their worlds have isolated, privatized, and shrunk. They might not feel like they have much to offer anymore. They're graying over with ash. They need to be gently brushed off and carried back to the sustaining fire that we've built right here. We have a nice range of ministries here, all kinds of options for involvement as we reach in and reach out. It may or may not be Sunday worship that represents the most appealing door for them to enter by. Maybe it's a Tuesday Bible discussion or Wednesday morning gardening; it could be an Earth Day cleanup, or the upcoming Ralph Herndon concert or even a trip we're planning to Guatemala this February to build a pre-school.

So, your assignment this week is to keep your eyes peeled for someone living an isolated life, someone who might benefit from the warming, encouraging fire of our congregation. You know that choir we had here last week? Almost none of those young adults go to church anymore. Most of them have been wounded and bruised by their previous church experience with their families. But you'd have been amazed by how many of them came up to me afterward because they felt enlivened and reinvigorated by what they experienced here with all of you. Many of them took my book, and others took our website and streaming address. We may have provided a kind of bridge for them leading back to connection...connection with others AND connection with Jesus.

People out there might not realize what we have to offer them as a community of Christ followers. But I sure hope we realize it...I sure hope we understand and have experienced the transforming power of what God is doing here in and through 1st Congregational Church. I sure hope that what God is doing in and through us here is enough to motivate you to get out there and be a bridge to someone's revitalization. It's not good for the human to be alone...Amen.