

MAJORING IN THE MINORS

Rev. Susan Bennett

I call myself a “church baby” – baptized as an infant, raised in the church, fell away for a while in college, came back, and I’m now an ordained Presbyterian pastor. I love church. I nag people all the time about how vitally important it is to participate in worship, study scripture together, serve together. In the church I serve, I’ll resort to any and all means to encourage people to get involved, especially in Bible study, up to and including a big dose of old-fashioned guilt when nothing else is working.

We all have to be careful of something, though: we can’t let church take the place of faith. We can’t let church involvement become our focus, instead of focusing on our relationship with God. Have to keep an eye on myself all the time. Do you?

Here’s my modern-day paraphrase of Isaiah 1:10-20: God tells Israel, through Isaiah, “Why do you keep bringing sacrifices and burning incense and celebrating religious holidays that contain no actual faith? These things are false, and I’m sick of them. Do you want to worship me; do you want to really know me? Clean up your act; cease to do evil; learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the weaker members of your community. Then we’ll talk about forgiveness and blessing.”

Oh, the Israelites were very religious. The priests offered sacrifices and prayed and worried about festivals and the laws of the Sabbath. But they were corrupt, and the people’s worship was empty. They were, in fact, the embodiment of Paul’s warning in 2 Timothy 3:5: people who hold to the outward form of godliness, but deny its true power.

Nothing has changed; any one of us, any of our churches, can fall into this same emptiness and not even know it. When we argue about who’s in charge, or what color to paint the bathroom, or how a visitor is dressed, or whether or not the choir sang the anthem we wanted, all we’re doing is majoring in the minors. We may attend church; we may follow rules and look good on the outside; but inside, we’re empty. And often we’re spending more time fighting with each other than reaching out to others with Jesus’ love and grace.

When “church” replaces faith, we’re in trouble. When we follow all the religious rules and show up every Sunday but ignore God’s call to love those around us, we’re holding on to an outward form of godliness, but denying the love and power of God.

And the world can see it. Hence the term, “religious hypocrites.”

Please don’t stop coming to church. In fact, recommit yourself to getting even more involved in worship and service. But remember there’s nothing more important than your own relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. Work on that: talk, listen, study, be joyful. And when you do come to church, don’t come to argue and carve out your territory and try to have things your way. Come with a heart full of hope and expectation. Look forward to being with your friends and worshiping God together. Bring the Spirit with you. God can do amazing things when we quit majoring in the minors.