

Today marks the beginning of a series of four sermons in which we will look at our church. The observations that were used were taken from the feedback we received on the Conference on the Past as well as feedback on a survey that was given to Session, Deacons and PW leadership.

The survey was entitled How Our Church Organization Works. The survey took views regarding vision, goals, core commitments, church climate, leadership, finance, structure of ministry, faith, mission, and strengths.

We will have a Conference on the Present following this series and then after Easter, move forward with vision for the First Presbyterian Church. I again, can not emphasize strongly enough that we need every one to participate. Decisions will be made and if you participate you will understand the direction and take ownership. If you do not, you may be confused or indifferent. I pray that does not happen.

This is the first observation. *We come to church and church activities weary, rattled, and empty from hectic, out of balance lives. We come with little left to give. We are free to choose in every area of our lives, but what we fail to realize is that our choices then bind us. Often our choices block meaningful participation as the church.*

The observations of most who participated are that a small number do a lot of work. Many do a little work. Most do not participate to make a difference. I am not pointing a finger at anyone. Everyone has to make his or her own mind up. People have told me that they feel burned out, tired, overused as they see people refuse to serve. Now everyone is called to serve and use gifts and God watches our service.

This brings us to our passage in Hebrews, chapter six, verses 9-12.

⁹ *Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.* ¹⁰ *For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.* ¹¹ *And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end,* ¹² *so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.* Let us pray.

Christianity Today had an article in 2007 entitled, "Christians Too Busy for God." Christians are simply too busy for God, a newly released five-year study has revealed. In data collected from over 20,000 Christians aged 15 to 88, The Obstacles to Growth Survey found that on average, more than four in 10 Christians say they "often" or "always" rush from task to task. Around 6 in 10 Christians say that it is "often" or "always" true that "the busyness of life gets in the way of developing my relationship with God".

Who are these people? Professionals whose busyness interferes with developing their relationship with God include lawyers (72 per cent), managers (67 per cent), nurses (66 per cent), teachers (64 per cent), salespeople (61 per cent), business owners (61 per cent), and housewives (57 per cent). While the study does not explain why Christians are so busy and distracted, it described the problem among Christians as "a vicious cycle" prompted by cultural conformity. It may be the case that

- (1) Christians are assimilating to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload, which leads to
- (2) God becoming more marginalised in Christians' lives, which leads to
- (3) a deteriorating relationship with God, which leads to
- (4) Christians becoming even more vulnerable to adopting society's assumptions about how to live, which leads to
- (5) more conformity to a culture of busyness, hurry and overload. And then the cycle begins again."

One person wrote, "I stay busy all the time. As a manager with a growing list of clients, I am always working. On top of this, there are things I must do around my house: cook, run errands, clean, etc. I am a busy woman with little time to spare. It seems like I even had no time for God. And that was a huge mistake. Now don't get me wrong. I do pray – day and night. I start my

mornings off reading prayers and I end my night saying them. (Side note, most people don't even do that.) But here's the thing: when you rush through those prayers or shorten them, this becomes a problem in regards to your relationship with God. You figure, "well, I got to get back to what I was doing, so let me shorten this prayer. God understands."

And He does. God knows that we live busy lives and a great deal of our time involves earning a living. However, when rushing through your prayers or shortening your time with God becomes a constant habit, then that's when you're starting to slip away from God – little by little.

In our passage, it says, God is not unfair. He will not forget the work you did or the love you showed for him in the help you gave and are still giving to your fellow-Christians. ¹¹Our great desire is that each of you keep up your eagerness to the end, so that the things you hope for will come true.

¹²We do not want you to become lazy, but to be like those who believe and are patient, and so receive what God has promised. Makes you wonder if they had the same problem.

Now, don't become defensive. I know some of you may say, "Hey, I serve on this team, and in worship, and I give, and you still want more." Well, that is why some people feel that people will be burned out. But what about someone who ushers four times a year and that is it? What about someone who has not served in anyway in making this the church God desires? Ordained ministries are the key ministries, elders and deacons. Have you even prayed to God to help you discern if you should participate? Or do you think it is too much that they are asking.

Serving God or serving self. As this statement indicates, for many the church is one more obligation. Their participation is shallow, erratic, and unsatisfying. For others, church is a way to connect and find meaning through intentional, spiritually nourishing participation. For many there does not seem to be enough time for church. With working spouses and the changing face of the contemporary family, for most churches the volunteer pool has shrunk. It becomes increasingly more difficult to maintain the programs of the church. We see this in our youth and children ministries. We may reach a time when deacons or session may need to decline.

Some churches respond to this experience by asking, "How can we get more members to do the work of the church?" They see this symptom as an operational problem to be solved, looking for ways to enlist more volunteers in order to relieve the overburdened few that carry the load.

But for others this is the wrong question. They are beginning to acknowledge that scarcity of time is just one symptom of powerful forces at work in our society today, shaping expectations, driving behavior, and competing with the Gospel's call to live as faithful disciples. A mindset of scarcity sets in. "I don't have enough time!" The Christian life gets pushed to the margins, limited to one hour a week, to that time when we "go to church."

What is the solution? Decisions need to be made about priorities. What is most important in your life? What does God want, not what you want? Is serving God a priority? Is being with God a priority? Should church be a priority? Your answers will determine the church we will become.

What is the solution? We learn about the other observations. We examine our church today. We look to the future. We make decisions for what we want to happen and how we will make it happen. We discern God's will for us individually and corporately. And we pray and pray and pray. And together, discern God's plan for us. Amen.