

I am not so sure my doing so is a financially sound idea, but I subscribe to six different newspapers I read or scan on the Internet, and while one of these I read strictly for the most important of reasons, to follow my University of Illinois football and basketball teams, the Internet has made it practical for me to scan prominent newspapers that for various reasons had never been part of my daily reading.

All this is a long way of saying that two news items in particular caught my attention this past week, and they are related and of relevance to why we gather here. The first, I do not recall where it appeared, was that the percentage of college freshmen who claim to be religious has declined sharply; let me repeat that: *the percentage of college freshmen who claim to be religious has declined sharply*. Putting that another way, an increasing number of young people are *secularists*. Which leads me to the second item, a column by the man who is ostensibly The New York Times' lone "conservative" voice, David Brooks, entitled: "Building Better Secularists."

Brooks, who is Jewish, was supposedly denied succeeding William F. Buckley, a devout Catholic, at Buckley's "The National Review" because of his faith. Whether that is true or not, while never denying that an atheist or an agnostic might be a moral person, in his column Brooks seemed to display implicit faith as he raised a number of problems or obstacles that non-religious people, *secularists*, encounter if they do seek to be morally good, not the least of which is that they need to work out their own moral code as opposed to turning to their religious faith.

But the among the obstacles Brooks mentioned, I want first to highlight this:

Secular individuals have to build their own communities. Religions come equipped with covenantal rituals that bind people together, sacred practices that are beyond individual choice. Secular people have to choose their own communities and come up with their own practices to make them meaningful.

Putting this in west-of-the-Hudson-River language, one of the important features of *our* faith is our religious community, the church, church with both a capital C and with a small c; the larger, capital C body of all believers, and the small c of individual denominations and the more intimate individual church communities, such as we gathered together today! It is within this community or these communities that we are led to follow Christ and to find the reinforcement we need for the trials life can throw at us.

But that other item, the growth in the number of secularists of whom Brooks writes and that is reflected in the religious identity of college freshmen, speaks to the fact that both the capital C Church and (and perhaps *especially*) the small c individual denominations and individual churches simply are failing as *communities* that bind — or let me editorialize, — that bind through showing and teaching.

The Church and churches simply are not proving to be the community and communities they are called to be. This is not a new theme for me, and if it seems as though I am on a bit of a "kick" having last week spoken about conflict in churches, this is not going to be the only theme on which I preach. But since it is from the Lectionary Scriptures that I take my inspiration for my sermons, I simply cannot ignore both what Paul wrote about all that he tried to do to bring people to Christ, and the futility of looking elsewhere than to God that second Isaiah points toward when he discusses the makers of idols. Who is going to lead the way to Jesus and through him to God if not the Church and churches?

And if it seems that I am harping at you, I am not, but I am going to express some frustration.

Everyone wants to see younger people and children in church, and I think this congregation better than any I have known displays that it knows the answer to, "What is worse than a screaming child in church?" "Silence!" And I think most of you have enjoyed as much as have I when I am able to sit down and talk with the kids who come here — and I think they enjoy that as well, as well as enjoying that you enjoy them. That's a lot of enjoy. But my talk with kids is at most three to five minutes out of an hour-long service, and so we are asking of kids varying in age this past year from four to twelve after that talk then to sit for another forty minutes that are as likely to turn them off from church and religion as to lead them to religion.

And I will not accept, “When I was a kid I had to sit still for an hour.” Right, though sitting still involved squirming and elbowing our brothers and sisters and scribbling on offering envelopes. When we were kids, we did not grow up with cell phones and iPads and all those things that, unfortunately, lead to higher expectations of being entertained and occupied. And if you notice how we control our “slides,” and I am our main IT guy, I clearly am not against iPads and other electronics.

I wish that I would have felt comfortable putting this sermon after our offertory, during which our worship experience will be enriched by our choir, conducted by a professional, George Oberdorf — he’s a tenor, so I am going to have to explain to him after church what I am saying, — and accompanied by another professional, Ruth Smith. Ruth is playing with us for several weeks because Nancy has some physical issues in her shoulders and upper back, and Ruth Bailey, who so kindly helped us last week with hymns, does not accompany the choir, so we enjoy two professionals. Besides, Ruth Bailey is a Canadian, and I think they read music from right to left.

Yes, professionals, because we put a premium on our worship services, and I challenge the Session of this church to budget from what all of you contribute enough to maintain a pretty-darned-good music program for a church this size, and “no,” not just to compensate for the preacher. We have wonderful leaders for our music, *but we do not have anyone, or at least more than one, to lead or to teach, whether volunteer or paid, any Sunday School during at least the part of the service that begins after I do a talk with the kids!*

Why should we wonder that most of us are north of . . . er, have gray hair.

Someone who is extremely thoughtful and intelligent said to me, “. . . but that,” meaning a church for younger people, “is not who we are.” Believe me, I am not belittling this person, but if that is not who we work to be, than we die, and our mission of taking Jesus Christ to all whom we can encounter dies with us!

Does this one church matter all that much? Some of us will die before it does, but multiply this by thousands of other churches, and soon *no* college freshmen will proclaim the faith of Jesus Christ.

Friends, most of you here today are here for only three to six months of the year, that I know, but there is a reason I keep proclaiming that you are part of this church family, and no different to me than those who are not such wimps as you about a few 110 degree days, er, weeks, er, months, and that reason is that this congregation consisting of all of you strikes me as a community that cares, that wants to be a community of faithful servants, wants to be what the apostle Paul might call “slaves” — or so I think and I hope you and I want to be. You know, it is flattering to my ego that one or two of you come here because you like my sermons or my sense of humor (which is not much on display in this sermon), but what I really hope is that at heart, you choose to come here because of something bigger that I do like to think I articulate, — which is . . .

Well, let me not articulate it but let me return to David Brooks:

Secular people have to fashion their own moral motivation. It’s not enough to want to be a decent person. You have to be powerfully motivated to behave well. *Religious people are motivated by their love for God and their fervent desire to please Him.*
and

Secularism has to do for nonbelievers what religion does for believers — arouse the higher emotions, exalt the passions in pursuit of moral action. *Christianity doesn’t rely just on a mild feeling like empathy; it puts agape at the center of life, a fervent and selfless sacrificial love.* Judaism doesn’t just value community; it values a covenantal community infused with sacred bonds and chosenness that make the heart strings vibrate. *Religions don’t just ask believers to respect others; rather each soul is worthy of the highest dignity because it radiates divine light.*

The italics are mine, but I have to say, I wish that I could say it as well as Brooks wrote it.

Those who do not have religious faith have an opportunity for a meaningful and happy life that I believe secularists do not — and I think that of all religious faiths, our Christian faith comes closest to

understanding and following who and what God is and wants, however imperfectly we live it (and please do not get me started on the problems with President Obama's perhaps well intended but really poor — or at least misleadingly incomplete — comments at the National Prayer Breakfast), however imperfectly we live it, I think that of all religious faiths, our Christian faith comes closest to understanding and following who and what God is and wants.

And so like Paul, I seek and encourage you to follow this:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. (1 Cor. 9:19)

Win more of them to follow Christ.

Oh, and know that if you become a slave by being willing on occasion to sacrifice hearing my sermons to share some time downstairs with children, my ego will survive unscathed, and you will not fall asleep from boredom. . . and maybe several years hence, there will be a few college freshmen who will proclaim not secularism, but Jesus Christ.

And in his name we pray. Amen.