

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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**Romans 12:1-21**

*"The Church"*

Later today we will hold our church's Annual Meeting, and in good Congregational tradition we will discuss what has happened in the past year, and cast votes and make commitments about the year ahead – trusting that God by his Holy Spirit is guiding us as we seek ways to be good disciples of Jesus Christ in this place and time. What we discuss will be largely programmatic – what groups, committees, activities, leaders, budgets do or plan to do. But for a few minutes, I want to look at "our church" from a different perspective – more of a "spiritual evaluation," if you will.

To do that, we need to ask basic questions about what a church is *for*. That sounds elementary, but it's a reality of our culture today that you cannot take anything for granted – even a basic grasp of what a church is for. That's why we have a proliferation of books and conferences and DVDs like Rick Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*, or the *Alpha Course*, or various versions of how to be "a healthy church" or "an effective church." People want to know what "church" is all about, and how to do it right.

I am not a great fan of "procedural" solutions, though they have their place. I think at a basic level we need answers like the one to the first question of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (one of the "founding documents" of our

Congregational heritage): "What is the chief end of man?" - pardon the 17<sup>th</sup> C. language – "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." We are made and we are called to glorify God and to enjoy God. What does that mean for the *gathered* people of God, called the church?

### 1) *Worship*

If we are to glorify God, that means our first priority is worship. Whatever else a church does, whatever it can do, first and foremost it must worship. All Christians know this, or should. Christians who have no money, no buildings, no staff, no Sunday School, no programs; Christians who are in prison, who are persecuted, who are penniless, still *worship* God through Jesus Christ.

That is why every church that can, builds a sanctuary for worship and makes it as beautiful as their money and their theology permit. That is why believers gather together on Sundays, to celebrate the day their Lord rose from the grave, and to worship God. Worship is the very center of the life of every church. It matters that we gather, that we hear the Scriptures, and celebrate the Lord's Supper; that we pray together, that we thank God for his goodness, that we ask his forgiveness, that we sing his praises, that we give money for his work, that we experience his presence in our midst.

Without vital worship, individual Christians wither and churches die. Worship is what we were made for, and it not only glorifies God but also allows us to enjoy him. If worship is not a joyful, thankful, experience of God; if we do not gain a deep sense of his reality, his presence, his grace, then nothing else we do as a church will have any power. Worship is the dynamic that drives everything else in the life of a church; it is the source of our motivation, power, and all our programs. When we are intermittent in our worship, we are missing something vitally important.

## 2) *Learning*

Second only to worship is learning. "Go and make disciples, *teaching* them all that I have commanded you," said Jesus in his final commission.

Teach people *the Bible*. That is how we most clearly know God, that is the only source of our knowledge of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Don't assume people know all that already, and that you can move quickly on to address the social and political and cultural issues of our day. Today, people don't know "the basics." So preach from the Bible, teach children the Bible, wrestle with the Bible in study groups, make it a discipline of your personal life to read it every day.

Then you will gain an understanding of your faith that you can apply to the problems of your families, your workplace, your schools, your communities. Soak yourself in the pages of Scripture until what the Apostle Paul calls "the mind of Christ" is formed in you. Wrestle with God over what Scripture means. Discover what it teaches you about yourself, about God, and about the world. You will be amazed! – and you will be strengthened, and made wise, and made confident in your faith.

## 3) *Service*

Thirdly, the church exists to serve people. If there was one persistent theme to Jesus' teaching, it was that his disciples should serve as he served. That means serving other

Christians, and the world. It means learning to be as gracious to other people – in church, in home, in work, in the community – as God has been to us. It means knowing that as he has forgiven us in Jesus Christ, and treated us far better than we deserve, we must treat others the same way.

Service teaches us graciousness, service meets the real needs of other people, service commends the Gospel, service extends the kingdom of God in the world. It may even – and some people make this the main focus, but it is not – make you feel good about yourself!

## 4) *Outreach*

Related to service, but distinct, is outreach, or evangelism – that scary word! The church must constantly renew the mission of Jesus in the world by reaching new people with his Gospel. If we do not, there will be no church in the future, and millions will be deprived of the life that Jesus came to bring.

That means, at the very least, passing on the faith to our children and grandchildren. The sociologists of religion will tell you that you can track and predict the rise and fall of world religions through the birth rates of their adherents. Too few children to replace the current population, and them not taught the faith, and Christianity will slowly disappear -unless God decides to send unexpected revivals.

But you and I know it's no longer just a matter of teaching children, because we are coming up now on *two generations* who have not been brought up in the faith. There are now many adults who know essentially nothing about Christianity; and the church has a huge task of reaching them – especially at a time when all the old cultural and social certainties about family, work, ethics, meaning are being swept away. So when we say "you can't take anything for granted these days," that includes very basic knowledge about Christian faith.

## 5) Community

Finally, the church is about building community – what we used to call “fellowship.” Christianity is essentially communal – it is not simply about personal faith in Jesus Christ, though it is certainly that – but about being made part of a community, a family, the “people of God.” That is how God meant it, and that is what many people in our fragmented and over-paced world long for.

We need each other; for support, for friendship, for wisdom, for example, for help. We cannot make it alone, and even extended families cannot provide the communal support they once did. In a world of big corporations and big government and big nations, we need the small supportive communities that once gave people a place to breathe, to be known by name, to be cared for in need, to be valued for who they are. Churches are one of the few places left where that still happens, and churches know they must work to keep up that sense of community because it matters – to God, because he too is communal – and to us, because we need it to flourish as human beings.

## 6) And Us?

By now, some of you are wondering “What’s he saying about us? How are we doing?” In many ways, very well. The “state of the church” is, I believe, good and getting better; and is pleasing to God, to his people, and to outsiders.

Worship here remains central. I grieve for those who cannot be part of it for reasons good and bad – sick children, family obligations, work schedules, conflicting sports, serving every week in the nursery or the Sunday School. I grieve for those who don’t think worship is important. I grieve for people for whom worship is not a joyful meeting with God.

But for those who do worship regularly, I believe it is a joy. One of our best-kept

secrets is our delightful, tranquil early Sunday service at 8:30am, which has attracted more people this year than at any time since we began it in September 2000. I am personally refreshed by it every week, and then have the joy of worshipping with an even larger and livelier group at 10:15am! Our worship is, as I believe it should be, full of Scripture, prayer, and music.

For some people, talk of worship in the past 20 years has immediately evoked music: what kind, and accompanied by what instruments? Now worship is more than music, as some churches are now rediscovering. We are steadfastly traditional in our music, choral and congregational, although we do use what is called a “blended” hymnal which contains a few dozen modern “praise songs.” But churches who have lived on contemporary Christian music are now scurrying back down the years to relearn “the great hymns of the faith.” We do our children or ourselves no favor by never learning to sing *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, or *O God, Our Help In Ages Past* or *Jesus Christ Is Risen Today*.

The fact is, history matters, in the church as well as in the culture. Today, a candidate like former NY Mayor Giuliani can run for the Presidency on the basis of “having been there on 9/11.” In ten years’ time, a whole generation of teenagers will never have heard of “9/11” – and we shall be amazed and astounded at their ignorance and indifference! “How could they not know that?” Church history matters too, and people who know nothing of it simply keep reinventing the wheel, or repeating the mistakes that marred the church in the past.

Our teaching and learning is, I believe, on a good track. Many more children are in (what are now regionally admired) Sunday School and VBS programs. But what matters is what they are learning. Not, as I suspect some parents want, “good manners,” but basic theology for children: “God made me”, “God loves me,” “Jesus loves me and died for me,” “We help others.” Our adults are studying the Bible in record numbers, some of them in

courses that require 5 days homework each week! Men's and Women's groups engage in serious discussions of faith, and needs, and they pray for one another. There is a strong sense that the Spirit of God is at work in many people's lives.

Our service to the community has been noticed and appreciated by more and more people as we not only meet needs but show a gracious and helpful face. Whether it's the hundreds who come to the Thrift Store, or the dozens of Cub Scouts and Brownies who use our space, or the senior citizens or the Civic Association or the Historical Society, or the Duck Pond Day crowds on our lawns, or the people out there who receive food baskets or Christmas gifts or Valentine cards, we are trying, and we are known to be trying, to help others in the name of Jesus Christ.

Our communal life is famous for its warmth, and I hope always for its welcome to newcomers. Fitting into a new church can be hard, and I pray we are doing all we can to make people feel at home. Our evangelism is not all it could be, but we are seeing many people bring their friends and families into the life of the church, and that is how it's supposed to work!

I pray that we will all be deeply aware of just how important it is to support one another and pray for one another. There are more troubles among us in more families and relationships than you might imagine. Let us be sure that when people are in need, we are part of the support network of Christians who keep them afloat when they feel other supports are crumbling.

Finally let us praise God that we are not only able to glorify him in our worship, in our spiritual growth, and in our service; but we can also enjoy him, and enjoy his people, in the community he has drawn us into.

Let us pray...