

The return from vacation always leaves me with the urge to clean out my office. Of course, by the time one shelf is finished, another has grown all new stuff. So this week, I decided to be proactive, and go through my office before I went on vacation. (By the way, promise me you won't go look at my office after church today.) As I was cleaning out old papers, I came across [this.]

[This] was my final paper at seminary. My Theology of ministry I called it. A collection of my thoughts and beliefs on a range of subjects, from the vital to the mundane. What I believe about God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, the Church, the Sacraments and Ministry. And nearly all of it begins the same. (This) is like ... (that); clothed, of course, in the language of absolute clarity and certainty as only a student can do. We're trained from a young age to consider what we are learning in terms of what we already know. Our knowledge is cumulative, and seminary knowledge is no exception. The first thing they teach you in preaching class is to ask the essential first question: what is it like?

It's only through looking back, though that you catch a glimpse of how inadequate those answers were. The church is a hospital for sinners sounds like a perfect metaphor, but a hospital is something that you build and wait for patients to walk through your doors. It's a model for a church that's committed to sitting and waiting. The church that ended slavery in the western world wasn't based on the metaphor of a hospital. The church of the social gospel that gave us a system of national health care wasn't a church modeled after a hospital. The church that fought and fights for civil rights isn't a hospital for sinners, because it's not a church in mission.

The problem is not metaphor; it's asking students to craft a metaphor without experience.

The church isn't a hospital a museum or any other institution we might have imagined: it's a power bar.

Understated, underwhelming, often taken for granted, and rarely noticed until something goes wrong, today I want to tell you about how if the church is anything, it's a power bar.

Think about it. Here is a simple piece of plastic, but into it you entrust some of your most valuable household items. Not only because it's an efficient way to multiply the number of power outlets in a given area, but because it offers those same devices protection from the kind of raw exposure that can be so damaging to sensitive electronics.

GK Chesterton told a story of sitting with a colleague one evening who asked him, as they sat by the hearth one evening, tell me: why is it that you feel this need to go to church, to be religious? Why not worship God on your own, free from the boundaries of organization? Chesterton thought for a moment, and instead of responding reached out with a pair of tongs, removed one burning coal from the embers and placed it on the mantle. As the fire behind it continued to roar and crackle, the single ember's glow faded, and its colour changed from red-hot to black and cool.

We need the church to be our spiritual surge protector, because on our own, if its just up to me, if I'm spiritual but not religious, I'm only ever going to experience my own mind, my own heart, my own strength and my own will. If I'm spiritual but not religious, the logical extent of that is that I get to decided what God is for me, and 99 times out of a hundred, it's a God who never challenges my preconceptions; it's a god who never challenges my morality; it's a god who never challenges me because I've reversed the way things are supposed to be and made God in my own image instead of the other way around. Think about this: If I'm spiritual but not religious then I've said that I'm going to try and connect, on my own, to the God who spoke and made the universe; who called the dead to rise; who is bigger than any I can possibly imagine – and I think I'm smart enough, good enough, or strong enough to be able to even think about plugging into that?

Church is what gives us a place to connect to something that's bigger than any one of us. The church stands in a history of experiencing God in real terms. The church is not an accident, nor is it a relic of an ancient time or culture. The church – not the Presbyterian Church, or St. Andrew's – but THE Church that is invisible and indivisible, is Gods gift to the world. It is, in all of its various forms, how the world is invited to experience God. It has, it will, and it does change – but it is this strange gift of relationship that God continues to give to the world in every new generation.

The world needs the church: WE need the church - but a power bar plugged into the wall isn't actually doing anything unless we also plug into it. Without something to charge, the power bar is just an ugly plastic wall ornament. And without people plugging into it, the church is just a building with benches and an organ. The church needs you to plug in.

That's the sum of Paul's argument here. Writing to the Colossians, he describes two concurrent relationships taking place in the life of the church. This is not optional in Paul's mind. To this point in the letter Paul has been detailing the basics of Christian discipleship, and so his argument is essentially: if you believe this is true, if this is who you want to be – then this is how you have to live. The Vertical – between us and God – and the Horizontal – between each of us, and ultimately between us and the world. According to Paul, the people of God are simply not complete unless both axes are accounted for.

So I want you to consider something: Every year it takes thousands of people hours for this community to do all of the things it does. From taking care of each other when life's storms hit, to reaching out in our community and across the world – to making sure that all of the pieces and parts of Sunday morning happen. THOUSANDS. And every year, the pool of volunteers that the church relies on gets thinner and thinner.

That's part of why we put together this morning. Because we want you to know that we need you. We need your gifts and talents and ideas. We need you to be the church we are becoming. We need what you bring to the table – and so whether this is your first time here, or your hundred and first time, whether you have kids or your kids have kids, whether you consider

yourself Presbyterian or not - join us after worship in the lounge for a time of fellowship where you can get a sense of some of what makes this church work. Men and Women, young and old, grab a hot dog and some coffee, and find out where you can plug in today

As you consider what God might have in store for you, hear the words of Frederick Beuchner: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Go and find that place, and plug in.