

The Second Choice

As I was celebrating the Baptisms we witnessed last Sunday and looking forward to today's service for the reception of new members, I thought of an old joke often enjoyed by pastors. The story goes that a certain church was plagued with an infestation of squirrels. The squirrels had come in through the belfry and had worked their way into the attic and between the walls of the church. Strange sounds were being heard from the ceiling and from between the walls, namely the pitter patter of little feet, and an occasional ruckus when two old squirrels got into an argument or when two young squirrels were wrestling just for fun. There was also the suspicion that the squirrels were getting into the main part of the building as broken nutshells began to show up in various places. Some on the building committee were particularly worried that the squirrels were chewing on the church wiring and that in was only a matter of time until they would burn the bethel down. The problem was what to do with the squirrels.

At first everyone was in agreement. Live traps would be set to catch the squirrels and then the squirrels would be transferred to the forest where they could make nests in trees and eat acorns the way squirrels were meant to do. A good number were caught and transferred to the woods. The problem, however, was that these were city squirrels with good homing instincts. It was either that or there had been a waiting list for the next available apartment. A couple of weeks went by and squirrels were back, living and playing in the church.

Some wanted to call the exterminators or set out poison or rat traps, but the animal lovers didn't want the squirrels harmed. Others felt that some electronic gizmos should be tried that would send out high frequency sounds not audible to the human ear, but extremely irritating to squirrels. Some on the church board, however, felt that this was too much like voodoo and didn't want to give church money to modern day con artists. The hunters thought it might be fun to take shotguns to the attic but the animal lovers, anti gun lobbyists, and property committee joined forces to

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prevent this. The proposal of a squirrel potpie supper at the church didn't gain much traction. Well anyway, the board went round and round on what to do with the squirrels.

While all this was going on the pastor mentioned the problem to a group of fellow ministers, who had the problem solved in no time. This is easy one man said, "All you have to do is catch the squirrels in those live traps, baptize them, take them into church membership, and it won't be long until you will never see them again. This seems to work well with people; it should work on the squirrels too!"

Now the reason this story works for pastors is that it identifies an actual trend. There are quite a few people who make a good beginning with Christ and His church, and then, for whatever reason, they fall away. I was curious how we are doing here at Fourth Street, so I went back over our records for the past 5 years. In just the past five years, not counting today, we have taken in 68 new members. That's pretty astounding when you stop and think about it. Good news. In looking at what happened to those 68 new members, however, we find that three have died and four have moved out of the area. Three more left because of divorce. Six left for other churches, and twelve just dropped out. Of the 68 new members we received over the past 5 years we have 37 of those who remain with us today. My concern here is not with those who died or moved out of the area; those losses were out of our hands. I feel sad about those who left because of divorce; I wish we could have done more to preserve those marriages, but much of that is also out of our control. I don't feel too bad about the six who left for other churches. Some people come to Christ or closer to Him through our ministry and join the church in their excitement, but aren't comfortable with the personality of our church in the long run. The important thing to note here is that we helped these persons on their spiritual journey, and it's ok that they are now serving the Lord somewhere else as long as they are still serving the Lord.

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Those for whom my heart grieves are the twelve who just dropped out and are making no conscious effort to follow Christ any longer. I wonder if we did something wrong in regard to them? I wonder what we could have done more or better to keep them on the path of discipleship, to preserve their souls for the kingdom? I wonder what will become of them and their families in the future?

But the point I want to make this morning is that there are two choices we each need to make in regard to following Christ. Paul says in Colossians 2:6 "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." The first choice is to receive Christ. The second choice is to continue to live in Him.

I believe that everyone here today has or has had the Holy Spirit knocking at the door of his or her life. God loves every one of us. He doesn't want any of us to live or die without knowing His love for us or to miss out on the great adventure He has planned for us. As He says in Revelation 3:20, Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." God desires us to have a living intimate personal relationship with Him. He has made us in such a way that in our heart of hearts, we long for Him; we long for Him even before we know who or what He is. When we don't know Him there is a hunger that seeks for Him until we discover Him seeking for us. Then we are invited to make the first choice.

John 1:11-12 say of Jesus, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." Many of you have heard or sensed the Holy Spirit challenging you to turn away from your sins and to receive Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Those who come to unite with our church today in Church membership have sensed or heard that call. They have told me that they believe in Jesus as their Savior and desire to follow Him as the Lord of their lives.

They have made the choice that opens the door to eternal life. They have made the good choice. They have said, "yes" to the first choice.

But there is a second choice that also must be made; it is a choice made on a regular or even daily basis. Again, Paul says, "Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him." In other words, the choice to receive Christ is just the beginning, not the end of our spiritual journey. I regularly tell it as a part of my personal testimony. I prayed to receive Jesus Christ as my personal Savior when I was 15 years old. It was at a revival meeting at the First Church of God in Hollidaysburg, my home church. Somehow I had been led to believe that when I took that first step, I would have a wonderful experience. I expected a vision, heavenly voices, or instantaneous holiness. I went to the altar at the evangelist's invitation, and I expected something awesome to happen. I was disappointed. The earth did not shake, I saw no angels, I heard no angel choir, I felt no different. When I went back to high school the next week, I had no special immunity against sin.

What I did have, however, was another choice. Should I write it off as if nothing happened or should I give it a chance? Should I quit or continue? It was in that moment that God popped an idea into my head; I say God popped it in, because it was too sophisticated for me to have thought of it myself especially at that point. The idea was that the blessings and good feelings and spiritual vibrations I expected to come with receiving Christ would come only as I began to serve Him. In other words, it wasn't enough to say I believed, I had to take action on that belief if it was to become real. And so, I made a choice. I said to the Lord, "If anyone in the church asks me to do anything, I'll try to do it." I thought, "maybe in the living out of the Christian faith, the Christian faith will prove it's worth to me."

To make a long story short, God heard my prayer and took me up on my promise. I was asked to become

president of our local youth group, I was asked to sing in the choir. I was asked to be song leader at the opening of Sunday School. I was asked to consider being a counselor at church camp. To each invitation I said,, "yes" as promised. Some things went better than others and lasted longer than others. The song leader thing was mercifully short-lived, but by the time I finished my first week as counselor at church camp, God had made Himself very real to me and had shown me the incredible love, joy, hope, and peace one can find only in Him. The rest, as they say, is history.

You who are joining with us in Church Membership today are making a choice to follow Christ with us and to serve Him not only in your personal life and family but to serve Him in the context of the ministry of this local church. I would encourage you not to sit on the sidelines but to ask the Lord where you can get involved. Ask Him to show you how your gifts and talents can be used to further His work here at Fourth Street. Be open to the suggestions and invitations for service that come from other members here, as they get a chance to know you and see your gifts. Determine not to be a member in name only, but to be an active member who will strengthen and encourage other members and help us to be the best church we can be for Jesus Christ our Lord. I say to you as Paul said to the Church at Colossae, "just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him."

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Colossians 2:1-7; James 1:17-25

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