

Snooze Alarm

“It’s more than about than you.”

Hebrews 10:23-25

Second in the series: Lights! Camera! Action! (“Church” is a verb, you know.)

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Sleeping In

She rolled over and hit the snooze alarm.

There are days you can’t do that. Others depend on you to get the breakfast on. You have meetings, a schedule to meet. You’ve set the alarm, maybe for the last possible moment; so when it sounds you have to get to the shower and dress, do what you need to do at home, and then fly out the door to meet the day.

Up and at ‘em!

So, savor the weekend. If there’s no commitment for which you’re very accountable you get this one, glorious chance to use the function built into our clocks by someone who must have known: *hit the snooze!* Then you can roll over and drift back to unconsciousness, capturing the Zzzz’s you missed all week. Bank them up for the sleep deprivation you know will come. Listen through your semi-consciousness to *someone else* doing the clattering in the kitchen this time; savor the lingering aroma of the fresh-brew you’ll get to...later. That’s what I’m talking about!

So here was Shirley: a type-A mother of three who was one of the most active people I knew, vital in several leadership roles in the church at once, responsible in every way. This one Sunday she just didn’t feel like going to church. It was going to be *her* time. Let her partner in life get the kids ready: he was competent, too. He could take them to church and leave the house quiet and neat. Then she could get up when she wanted. Stay in her robe while sipping the coffee and really spending time with the paper. Listen to the birds singing. Feel the warmth of the sun sitting on the patio.

Just this once.

I know that it’s in the middle of July when friends are up at the cabin and the kids are off on a mission trip; others sent away to camp. Yet, you’re *here*; which says something. At least it suggests to me that I am preaching to the choir.

Yet, isn't there ever a time you would like to just hit the snooze and roll over and not have to make it for a 9:15...or 11:00 worship?

You probably heard about the woman who went into the bedroom to get him out of bed for church. She said, "Get up! It's time to get ready." The groggy voice muffled through the pillow, "I don't want to go. The sermon is boring and nobody there likes me. Give me two reasons I have to go." She snapped back, "Well, the first reason is that you're 45 years old; and the second is that you're the pastor!"

Maybe everybody has a day they'd like to just...sleep...in.

Being Present

Of course, nowadays church is no longer the center of a town's social activities. It's no longer the place you *have* to be to make the connections you need for business or society.

Attendance in the United Methodist Church nation-wide enjoyed a little growth in the 90's; then has been declining every year since 2002. Between 2000 and 2008 attendance declined over 10%.¹

Lest you think that this is something that has to do with style of church government, type of worship, size of church, theology or doctrine: it isn't. It's something that's been happening across the landscape of American churches. It's a social phenomenon. Lovett Weems, a United Methodist professor of church leadership, suggests that it's due to the fact that people worship less frequently and aren't as interested in organized religion these days. The large masses of the church-faithful tend to be older and are becoming less mobile.²

Fact is: the idea of *not* hitting the snooze alarm is becoming less and less attractive. In a day when it's popular to say "I'm spiritual but not religious," a lot of people believe in Jesus, pray and feel close to God, and do nice things, but they're just not excited about sitting through a worship service or getting mixed up in "church politics."

I attended a conference in May for pastors and members of churches that are in partnership with United Methodist churches in Lithuania. Leaders told us religious trends in the Baltic's. They said that the Methodists essentially closed their doors when the Nazi's came; then they stayed closed when the Soviets prohibited congregations from worshipping at all. It was during those days that every day a woman walked by an old Methodist Church building in Vilnius and placed her hand on its stone wall praying

for the day when the church would again be open. One day after the Soviet era ended and religious freedom returned, a leader from the Board of Global Ministries appeared to restart the ministry that had for so-long been absent. The woman met him; and (you can guess) the first words out of her mouth were, “What took you so long?”

The Nineteen-nineties was a decade of excitement when the Methodist Church grew rapidly. People were hungry for the Gospel. Their new freedom to meet was met with so much enthusiasm.

Things have changed since then. They’ve gotten used to the church being there and now people have found other things to do; other interests have captured their attention.

Now, the work of the church is harder work.

There, it’s a lot like it is here. People won’t come to church just because it’s the thing to do. People want to know what’s so important about gathering together. Why *can’t* you be just as vital a Christian, just as faithful a follower of Jesus if you stay away as if you come?

I might be preaching to the choir. *You’re* here on a Sunday in the middle of July. But maybe it would be important to think about why you come; and what you’d say to those who don’t, if it ever became a topic of conversation.

Because actually, this isn’t a new issue at all. It was something Christians had to deal with back in the days of the Early Church when there were still grandparents who knew the first disciples first-hand. Even then, the writer of Hebrews said the people were “inattentive, neglectful and drifting.”

So the writer says *why* to stay connected: reasons so important that you can tell that the writer writes these things for him or herself as well as the readers:

Because of Jesus whose sacrifice gave us boldness to enter the sanctuary of an awesome God; and because of Jesus who is our high priest: let us hold fast to hope. And let’s bug each other to grow and love: to excel in doing good things. And let’s keep meeting together because together is where we belong. (*My paraphrase*)

Approach God,

hold fast,

help each other out...together.³

This is what it means to belong to God in a new society God has fashioned. Let go of this new matrix of relationships Jesus has called together, and you don't really have everything God has in mind. God wants you redeemed; God wants you; and God also wants you together.

You need all of these parts.

Snooze alarms are understandable; but over the course of time we really need to get up and get going.

Up and at 'em.

What if church is not just something to endure? What if church is more than a thing: an institution or a building or a meeting that you have to go to? What if "church" is a verb: people busy living out being the people of God exploring and learning things that make a difference, bringing sides together, learning new ways to get along, and new opportunities to change the world?

What if worship was not boring and out-of-touch, but was so full of praise and joy and deep things that you couldn't help but get caught up in it? What if church were a dynamic web of relationships that got you to grow and know you were loved by God more than anything...and that you really are forgiven for everything you've ever done? What if church got you to do life better than you would if you were left to do it on your own?

You Never Know

Shirley rolled over and hit the snooze. I understand. And then she listened to the clamoring in the kitchen and smelled the coffee and...

She couldn't stay in bed.

She dragged herself up and, without really committing herself to a change of mind she just started doing the things that she would have done if it were any other Sunday. One thing at a time.

It wasn't a change of heart. Her heart was still in bed...drifting. Even when she got all the way to church.

More habit, I suppose, than conscious choice. But she got out of the car and went in and saw the regular people in their regular places in the hallway. Most of them were talking to the same people they usually talked to.

Nothing new. Nothing different. She could have put it off for another week.

When they were walking into the sanctuary she went by a friend and just touched his arm, almost without thinking; and she gave him her usual greeting: "Hi John. It's good to see you."

Then she went to her usual seat and worshiped the usual way they worshiped.

It wasn't until sometime later. I don't know whether it was later that day or that week or even a month later that she found out what she had done.

That day was *not* a usual day for John. He had come to church hurting. Really hurting. He was there looking for something, though I don't know if *he* knew what it was he would find. It was just

something;

and he really needed it.

He was still troubled when Shirley came by in her usual way and she said, "Hi. It's good to see you."

It was good. And there was something about that simple touch that Shirley had never given a thought.

However it happened, something took place in the simple touch. Suddenly John was not alone in a crowd. He was known. He was cared for.

And the caring was a touch of God. It got to his hurt.

It *really* made a difference. And Shirley hadn't thought it wouldn't make a difference if she were there or not.

When we renew our membership vows we say, "...we renew our covenant faithfully to participate in the ministries of the church by our...*presence*..."

In the end, it really does make a difference.

At the end of the day, it's more than just about you.

¹ Lovett Weems. "No Shows," *The Christian Century*, © September 22, 2010.

² *Ibid.*

³ Fred Craddock. "The Letter to the Hebrews," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. pp 119-120.