

Perfecting the Imperfect
1 Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

One Haitian pastor illustrated the need for total commitment to Christ with this parable:

A certain man wanted to sell his house for \$2,000. Another man wanted very badly to buy the house, but because he was poor, he couldn't afford the full price. After much bargaining, the owner of the house agreed to sell the house for half the original asking price with just one stipulation: he would retain ownership of one small nail protruding from just over the door. After several years, the original owner wanted the house back, but the new owner was unwilling to sell. So first the owner went out, found the carcass of a dead dog, and hung it from the nail he still owned. Soon the house became unlivable, and the family was forced to sale the house to the owner of the nail. The Haitian pastor's conclusion: "If we leave the Devil with even one small peg in our life, he will return to hang his rotting garbage on it, making it unfit for Christ's habitation."

The writer of Hebrews wants the readers to know for certain that what Christ has done in his death on the cross is a "once and for all" sacrifice that frees us - frees people not only from their debts of sin, but also from the ritual sacrifices that once were required of them. This passage offers the hearers - you and me - the community to be organized in a new and living way. With Christ old patterns of living are broken, and fresh possibilities to live in God beacon the faithful to a new identity. In other words, when we give our whole lives to God, we can live only as new creations. The old has fallen away and the new identity is left.

We, human beings, are far from perfect. We are flawed in so many ways, but God has perfected our imperfections through Jesus Christ, accepting us as we are and forgiving those places where we fall short. Listen again to this verse from Hebrews:

"Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another."

In his book, *I Am a Church Member*, Thom Rainer writes of two members of the same church who met in a Bible study and hit it off right away. They shared many of the same interests and began meeting every Monday morning at 6:00 to share breakfast before their work day began. After several months, Michael began to notice changes in Liam's attitudes. Still, Michael was caught off guard when Liam began to share his dislike for the church of which they were both members.

"Lana and I have decided to leave the church," Liam began. Liam then began to run through all the reasons. "Lana and I joined the church to learn the deep truths about the Bible. But Pastor Bob is just not feeding us. We're getting nothing out of his messages. There are several really great people, like you and Karen, but honestly, there are a lot of hypocrites in our church. And, Pastor Bob acts like he cares about us, but I'm not so sure. I told him that Lana's father was having surgery, and he never visited him. Michael, you and Karen and the kids are a class act and you seem enthused about the church, but I wonder at times if you are blind to all the problems in the church. We really are two different kinds of church members. Why is that, do you think? Why do we have such different perspective?"

Frankly, I think we, the church, the Body of Christ, made a grave error when we stopped referring to each other as Brother or Sister, or as disciples and moved to call those of our own congregation, MEMBER. Membership connotes privilege, receiving something in exchange for your tithe, your presence, your involvement.

Michael Foss writes in his book, *Power Surge*, that the Protestant church of the 50's membership implied obligation; however, in today's cultural context, membership has come to mean prerogatives or privilege. If I am a member, I pay my dues when the plate passes my way, and I show up when convenient, then I should expect certain privileges in return: the use of the facilities a good meal every once in a while, my needs to be met, and a chaplain when life throws me a curve ball.

Floss continues by adding that the tragic flaw of the membership model of the church lies in the focus of its ministry. For the first three centuries of the church, membership was the consequence of discipleship. The focus of the early church was on becoming Disciples of Christ, following the example Jesus set.

"Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

"Let us provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, encouraging one another..."

Discipleship requires that we live every minute, every second, every day and every night following God - with God leading us and directing our thoughts and our actions - day or night, work or play. To be disciples means that we must decrease and that God must increase.

Today, on Commitment Sunday, it's not about pledging your dues as members. This day is the day of reckoning, as we imperfect as we are, pledge our very selves, our whole lives as followers, disciples, of God. We do not leave a nail for the evils of this world to cling to, but we give our whole selves to God.

As we sing our next hymn, I invite each of you to pledge your lives, your whole lives to following God as a disciple, not as a member. As you feel led, come, feel the waters of baptism and re-commit your lives to serving the God who created you in his very image, who sustains you this very day, and who redeems your life to newness and grace. Amen.