

You Snooze, We All Lose

Sermon for 7/31/2011

By Don Finch

Those who know me are aware that mornings aren't exactly my favorite part of the day. Of course, this is assuming you think of mornings as anything before about noon.

And then of course, there are Sunday mornings. Since I work 6 days a week and have to be up Monday thru Saturdays, that only leaves me with Sundays. So like many do on a Saturday, when the alarm goes off Sunday morning I like to roll over and hit the snooze button.

But most days you just can't do that. Others depend on you.

You have a schedule to meet. You've set the alarm, maybe for the last possible moment; so when it sounds you have to grab a quick shower and dress, and then fly out the door to meet the day.

But on those rare days if there's no commitment for which you're accountable you get this one, glorious chance to use the function built into our clocks by someone who must have known what most mornings are like: *you hit the snooze button!* 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; savor the lingering aroma of the fresh-brewed coffee you'll get to...later. That's what I'm talking about!

So here was someone, lets call her Amy: a mother who was one of the most active people I knew, vital in several leadership roles in the church, 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 husband get the kid ready: he was competent too. He could take him to church. Then she could get up when she wanted. Stay in her robe while sipping the coffee and 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 a hot July day when a lot of your friends are on vacation, maybe the kids are away at camp so for this one Sunday maybe you can just forget about church and sleep in. Yet, you're *here*; which says something. At least it suggests to me that I am preaching to the choir but then again a choir needs a sermon now and then too.

Yet, isn't there ever a time you would like to just hit the snooze button and roll over and not have to make it for a 10am worship?

There's a story about the woman who went into the bedroom to get her husband out of bed for church. She said, "Get up! It's time to get ready for Church." The groggy voice muffled through the pillow replied, "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 need to act like an adult; and the second is that you're the pastor!"

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

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%.

Lest you think that this is something that has to do with style of the Methodist church, our type of worship, theology or doctrine: it isn't. It's something that's been happening across the landscape of American churches.

Lovett Weems, a United Methodist professor of church leadership, suggests that it's due to the fact that people 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. Sound familiar?

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."

In doing my research I read about a conference for pastors and members of churches that are in partnership with United Methodist churches in Lithuania in which leaders talked about religious trends in the Baltic's over the past century. 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 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.

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 to church?

You're here on a hot and humid Sunday in July. But maybe it would be important to think about why you come; and what you'd say to those who don't.

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 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 themselves as well as the readers:

Because of Jesus whose sacrifice gave us boldness to enter the sanctuary of an awesome God; 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. (I'm paraphrasing here)

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 and at times useful; 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 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 and new opportunities to change the world?

What if church were a dynamic web of relationships that got you to grow and know you were loved by God more than anything?

What if church got you to do life better than you would if you were left to do it on your own?

You remember that fictitious Amy I talked about earlier? Well she rolled over and hit the snooze on that Sunday. And then she listened to the clamoring in the kitchen 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. 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. It's good to see you."

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

But what she didn't know was that it was *not* a usual day for that person she greeted. 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 Amy 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 she had never given a thought.

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

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

It *really* made a difference. And she thought it wouldn't make a difference if she were there or not. Oh how wrong she was.

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 or me. It's gathering together to share the Lord's blessings with one another. So tell everyone you know, on any given Sunday, if you snooze, then we all just might lose.