



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**  
Presbyterian (USA)

# Why Church? Because we're trying to be real.

SCRIPTURE:  
Romans 14:1-12

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June 4, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**A**ccording to the latest research by the Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life, 25% of American adults, one in four, consider themselves “spiritual but not religious.” It’s the highest percentage ever recorded by the Forum. Many of them consider themselves people of faith, they just have no interest in being part of a church or synagogue or mosque. They are clear that they still are spiritual people. Huge majorities say they believe in God or a higher power or even Jesus Christ. They just have no interest in being part of us. Remarkably, when the researchers asked them why, they had very similar answers. The most common answer: They said the church was full of judgmental and hypocritical people. Judgmental and hypocritical. You and me. Judgmental and hypocritical. They’re not wrong.

When I was teaching at Columbia Seminary, I received a grant to study why so few young adults, many of whom we had baptized and confirmed, were not staying with us in the Presbyterian Church. I held a series of conversations with focus groups around the country. In a focus group in Metairie, Louisiana—just outside of New Orleans—I met Steven, a young man who used to go to one of our churches but stopped. When I asked him why, he said he got tired of “the looks.” When I asked him what he meant by “the looks,” he explained that after graduating from college with a music history degree, he had moved to New Orleans to work for the classic radio station there. He loved all music, but his favorite genre was classical music. One of his responsibilities was to work the late night/early morning shift on Saturday night into Sunday morning. So, after working all night, he would get off at 7 a.m. and go to a Waffle House to get some breakfast and make it to the early service of the magnificent St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church. I’ve preached there. It is a beautiful Sanctuary with stained glass windows and gorgeous dark paneling. He loved their music. He especially loved

when the choir sang Latin anthems. Steven would come in and sit down for worship usually wearing what he called his ‘good’ jeans, a polo shirt instead of his usual t-shirt and Birkenstock sandals. Inevitably, he said, he would notice some of the older, white-haired ladies looking at him. They would give him “the look” and he got tired of it so he stopped going. When I asked him what he meant by “the look,” he said, “You know. THE LOOK” and then he looked at me and rolled his eyes in disgust. That was “the look.” He told me he was one of only a handful of young people there for the early service. “Why do church people have to be so judgmental? Shouldn’t they just be glad I’m here?” he asked me. “Of course,” I told him.

The Apostle Paul has some thoughts on this. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, he tells them to stop judging one another. The church included both Jews and Gentiles and some of them were eating anything including meat that was not kosher or had been used in sacrifices to idols while others refused to eat that meat so they only ate vegetables. Apparently, they were criticizing one another and judging one another. Paul says to stop it. Let those who want to eat meat do so and let those who want to only eat vegetables do so. Stop judging one another.

When it reads that “some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike,” apparently some of the Jewish Christians continued to follow the ritual Jewish holy days while other Jewish Christians and Gentiles ignored the holy days. The groups are judging each other and criticizing each other. Paul says, “Stop it.” Let those who want to celebrate the Jewish festival days do so and let those who do not want to celebrate the Jewish festival days not celebrate. Stop judging one another.

The young man in New Orleans asked, “Why do church people have to be so judgmental?” I wonder the same thing about myself because I can be judgmental

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and hypocritical with the best of them.

I was preaching at the Covenant Presbyterian Church in Albany, Georgia for a former student of mine who was serving as their pastor. Albany is about a 3.5 hour drive due south of Atlanta—deep into south Georgia much closer to the Georgia/Florida stateline than to Atlanta. I had never been there. The church was nestled in a beautiful neighborhood next to a large lake. I met the pastor and he gave me a tour of the church. It is a beautiful campus comprised of the Sanctuary building, the education and fellowship building and the church office building. As we were walking out of the Sanctuary building, I noticed one of the homes across the street had a large Confederate flag flying in the front yard. The pastor saw me notice it and said, “He’s a church member. You’ll probably see him tomorrow for worship.” I thought, “Oh great.”

The next morning he and I prayed together then we made our way into the Sanctuary. I sat down and looked out at the congregation and I saw him—the man who lived across the street in the home with the Confederate flag. He was an older white man wearing a suit and tie with his arms crossed looking like he was not at all pleased that I was there preaching. The worship service went fine and after the benediction I walked with the pastor to the back doors of the Sanctuary to greet people and I noticed that the Confederate flag gentleman got in line to greet me. I was bracing myself. Then just before he was ready to greet me, two children ran up to him yelling “Grandpa!” and he broke into this huge smile and hugged these two beautiful children. Following behind them were their parents, a young white woman and a tall, Black young man. I had noticed them earlier during worship. The young woman kissed the older man on the cheek and hugged him. Then I was surprised when the young Black man did the same. Together they stepped up to me and the older gentleman shook my hand and thanked me for a fine sermon and said he was sure glad I came to visit them. Then he introduced me to his daughter and son-in-law and two grandchildren whom he clearly loved with all his heart.

Later, at coffee hour, I went up to him and quietly told him I owed him an apology. He was surprised and asked why and I told him that I had wrongly judged him to be the owner of the house with the Confederate flag across the street. He smiled and said, “Oh, that’s all right, pastor. Some years ago I might have been that.

But then my daughter married the finest man I have ever met and everything changed.” Then he leaned in to me and said, “I know who owns that house. You want me to point him out to you?” I told him that it was okay.

When a person says the church is full of judgers and hypocrites, I tell them it’s true because the church is made up of human beings who are imperfect. Even when I do not want to, I still judge people. All of us do. It’s human nature. It was true in the first century in the Roman church; it is true in the 21st century. But while I confess that we are judgmental and hypocritical, in the next breath, I tell them that we are doing our best to be honest about that—to confess that we are not yet the people God’s yearns for us to be and that we are trying to be real. We are just trying to be real.

In that same research project where I met Steven from New Orleans, a few months later I was in Des Moines, Iowa with another group of young adults only this time, two of them were actually in a Presbyterian Church. I called them the aberrations. I asked them why they were in a Presbyterian Church, and they told me this story.

The two of them had met while students at Rutgers University in New Jersey. They got married after they graduated and then two different companies from Des Moines recruited them to come and live in the Midwest. Neither of them had ever been to Iowa or the Midwest and they thought, “Well, why not?” They decided to try it. They moved to Des Moines and found that they liked living in Iowa. They were able to buy a house they never could have afforded in northern New Jersey. They each liked their jobs and began to make some friends with other young adults. Having both grown up Presbyterian, they did visit a few Presbyterian Churches. When they visited, they did not sign the Friendship pad; they’re not stupid. But most Sunday mornings, you would find them at home, drinking good coffee and reading the New York Times online and relaxing.

After they had been there for three years, the young woman was doing her monthly self breast exam and felt a lump for the first time. She was a little concerned. She called her Mom in New Jersey who told her it was likely a cyst—that she had had several of them and reminded her that their family had no history of breast cancer which was a major indicator. Still, her mother encouraged her to get it checked. She called her physician’s office and the nurse told her just to come by that day

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and the young woman remembers thinking, “This would never happen in New Jersey.” When her doctor saw her, she said that she did not mean to alarm her but this was worth another look so she referred her to another doctor. She saw that doctor and he recommended a biopsy. A week later and a half later, she received a call from his office asking her and her husband to both come in. The doctor told her they had checked twice to be sure. She had a stage 4 cancer that was very aggressive and they had important decisions to make. She told me that they were devastated and she called her parents and in-laws right away. Her mom and dad flew out from New Jersey as did her in-laws, her sister and brother-in-law.

She decided to have surgery right away, a mastectomy, and when they checked into the hospital, the clerk asked about her religious affiliation. She told her she was a Presbyterian. The clerk asked which church and the husband explained that they had not joined a local church. They did visit one Presbyterian Church twice, but they could not recall the name of the pastor. The clerk filled in the form and the chaplain called the church and the pastor remembered the young couple because they had visited twice and had not filled out the friendship pad either time. The pastor came to the hospital right away and was wonderful. He prayed with the couple and then stayed with the husband and family most of the day.

When she got back home after surgery, there was a stretch of a few days when everyone had gone back to New Jersey and her husband had to go to work. The young woman said she felt terrified and utterly alone. She remembered telling her husband that as soon as they could, they needed to move back to New Jersey because they couldn’t go through this on their own.

She was lying down upstairs when she heard a knock on the door. The knock was persistent. She got up annoyed and went downstairs and opened the door and there was an older woman there with a casserole. She asked the young woman if she had the right house and explained that she was from church. The young woman asked, “What church?” And the woman named the church where the pastor served. Then she explained that she had baked a casserole and some rolls and a pie for them. The young woman was perplexed and said, “But I didn’t order this.” The older woman replied, “Oh, I know, dear. Ever since we heard about you, we have been praying for you and for your husband. I’m so sorry

you have to go through this.” Then the young woman asked, “How much does this cost?” And the older woman smiled and said, “Oh, this is free. It is what we do when you find yourself in a crisis.” Then the young woman thanked the older woman and asked if she would like to come in and visit. The older woman asked if she felt up to it and the younger woman said that actually she would be glad for some company. So, the older woman came in and put the food in the refrigerator and they sat together and visited and laughed some and cried some. It turns out the older woman was a breast cancer survivor.

The young woman was getting tired and apologized and said she needed to go lie down. The older woman said, “Of course. And I don’t mean to be critical, dear, but I am looking around and you know, you need to dust.” The young woman replied apologetically, “Yes, well, I really have not felt much like cleaning lately.” The older woman replied, “Oh, I understand, but if you don’t mind, I love to clean. I would be happy to clean your downstairs while you go rest. I will be very quiet.” So, the young woman thanked her and went upstairs to rest. When her husband came home, he saw the food in the refrigerator and said, “Babe, did you make that food?” The young woman replied, “No, a woman from the church brought it over.” “What church?” he asked. “You know, the pastor’s church,” she replied. “Did you order it?” he asked. “No, she just brought it. She told me this is what they do when people were in a crisis. She also cleaned downstairs.” “She cleaned our house?” the husband asked. “Yes,” the young woman replied.

The next day there was another knock on the door. It was an older gentleman looking a little uncomfortable. The young woman answered and the older man said, “Hello. Are you...?” The young woman said she was. “Oh, good,” the man said. “I am from the church.” Then the older man continued, “Here is a chicken dinner and it’s not quite done because my wife wants it to be hot when you eat it. There are instructions there on how to finish it and you cannot mess this up because if you do, I will get yelled at, and I do not like getting yelled at.” The young woman thanked him and then asked if he would like to come in and visit. He looked uncomfortable again and said, “No, not really.”

Then he said, “But I noticed your screen door isn’t working right. I know what’s wrong. It won’t take but 10 minutes to fix it. I have my tools in my car.” “You want

to fix the screen door?” she asked. “Yeah, it’s easy.” “Well,” she told him, “my husband said he would fix it but that was months ago.” “Yeah,” said the older man, “young guys don’t really do this stuff well. But I know what’s wrong. I can fix it.” So the young woman said she would be grateful.

When her husband came home, he asked her, “Hey, did you fix the screen door?” “No,” she said. “A man came from church today.” “From the same church?” “Yes,” she answered. “It took him 10 minutes. And he brought us a chicken dinner and it’s not yet finished but there are instructions with it and you have to do it right because he does not want to get yelled at.”

Friends, I know this church. I went to visit them. They are a smaller congregation with about 65 members, mostly older adults. These people provided a meal for this couple every day for six months. The husband told me, “We have frozen casseroles until Christ comes again. We have never eaten so good in our whole lives.”

He said they had so much food they invited their friends from their offices to their house one night and served a bunch of casseroles. Their friends marveled at the food and asked, “Where did you get this?” and the young woman said—and listen to the possessive pronoun: “It all came from OUR church.” The young woman turned to me and said, with tears streaming down her beautiful face, “I have already told my family and friends back in New Jersey, whether I live for six more months or six more years or 60 more years, I am never leaving my church. I am going to die here in my church.”

I know we can be judgmental. And I know we can be hypocritical. But come on, church. We can be better than that. The young woman said, “I was terrified and alone.” And the church stepped up and said: You are not alone. Judgmental and hypocritical, sure. But we are trying our best not to be. We’re trying to be real. By the grace of God and for the glory of God. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.