

SPUR ONE ANOTHER ON

In my years as a pastor, I've had conversations with a number of "unchurched" individuals. They had little or no religious affiliation, and they weren't looking for one. Connecting with and being part of a church just didn't interest them at all. Some of them told me, in so many words and sometimes with a rather proud attitude, "My family and I don't want to go to church. Instead, on Sunday morning we might turn on the television, watch a religious program for a little while and have a few minutes of church right in our living room. Or sometimes we'll get in the car, go somewhere and have an encounter with God in nature." I remember one of those people telling me, "We feel more religious on Sunday morning in front of the TV listening to a sermon or hiking outdoors at some beautiful spot than we do attending church."

In a way, I get that. It's probably a lot easier feeling vaguely "religious" in the safe cocoon of your living room, watching preachers who always smile, encourage and talk about the personal rewards and financial blessings of being a Christian, or hiking around some quiet place in nature where God speaks so softly and sedately that you can easily ignore Him, than it is belonging to a faith community that might challenge you to reevaluate your priorities in life, call you to get out of your comfort zone and take risks on behalf of your faith, and sometimes even make you uncomfortable. "Church" is much safer and a lot less stressful at home, or outdoors in nature where the deer and the antelope—or the moose and the bear—play.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote, ". . . let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day [of the Lord] approaching."

There's a curious word embedded in that sentence I just read: the Greek word *paroxysms*, translated in the New International Version of the Bible as "to spur on." Other Bible translations interpret it as "to provoke" or "to stir up."

Is that what a church community is supposed to be? A place where its members are encouraged to "provoke," "stir up" and "spur on" one another. And what does it actually mean to "spur one another on toward love and good deeds"? Have you ever been provoked and spurred on to love a neighbor by a

sermon? Mine or anyone else's? Or do you recall a time when you were stirred up or driven to do good deeds after worship down at Neighboring, or when you attended a Council or Worship and Spiritual Care or Governing and Finances meeting?

There's an old saying I think every pastor has heard at one time or another, that goes, "A pastor's responsibility is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Well, I can tell you from my personal perspective as a preacher of the Gospel and minister of Jesus Christ that sometimes the easiest thing isn't to afflict you in your comfortableness, but to stand up here at this pulpit and speak sweet nothings to you. And that tends to be what I do, more often than maybe I should.

It's easiest for me to just preach on those things all Christians want to hear and are pleased to hear. "God is love, the Lord is merciful, divine grace costs little and expects nothing, you are forgiven and all is well." How sweet that sounds. "You don't need to change for the Lord. Just carry on and continue to live your life the same way you've been living it for years. And when I'm done preaching such a sermon, everyone in the pews surely breathes a quiet sigh of relief. "Whew. It's okay for me to stay the course. I don't have to give up anything or do anything more than I'm already doing."

The same thing holds true when I'm counseling someone who has clearly taken a wrong turn at Albuquerque in their life, and they would really benefit from some tough, honest and not very easy to swallow guidance from me. But I often avoid doing that, and try to justify it by telling myself, "I'm a loving pastor and I don't want to hurt people. Besides, it's really none of my business. So I'll stay silent and let them live their life the way they want and do what they want." Of course, what I'm really saying is, "It will be a lot safer for me personally and cause me a lot less turmoil and conflict if I just leave them alone and stay out of their lives so they will stay out of mine."

But the thought did occur to me as I was writing this sermon that maybe you out there in the pews—or at least some of you out there—have come here this morning wanting to be provoked and incited and spurred on as a Christian. Maybe you've grown a little bored always playing it safe as a follower of Christ. Maybe things have grown a little stale and you're ready to be shaken up a little in your faith journey.

After all, you could have remained at home and stayed safe. But here you are. You got out of bed, got dressed and came to church. Could that be because deep down you're hoping that God is calling you to be something better, something more significant than merely a comfortable, content, nominal, kind of lukewarm Christian?

If that's the case and you do feel that way, then I'm doing you a disservice and letting you down by not challenging you on occasion and provoking and spurring you on to love and do the good deeds Christ wants you to accomplish.

Several years ago, in a magazine called *World Traveler*, an article was published entitled "Red Tape Kills." It profiled a man named Robert Macauley, who founded an organization called *The AmeriCares Foundation*. *The AmeriCares Foundation* is a humanitarian group that provokes and spurs on relief efforts in the United States and around the world. It was once named the number one charitable organization by *Money Magazine*, with an astonishing average of using 99.1% of its \$290 million income on good works. Robert Macauley's philosophy in running his foundation is, "We don't break laws, but we do break a lot of rules. And we never give in."

Macauley credits Pope John Paul II with getting him started on *AmeriCares*. John Paul called Macauley one day and asked him if he could get medical supplies to Poland. "I couldn't say no to the Pope," he said, "so I told him, 'Certainly, your Holiness.'" Macauley promised to raise \$50,000; and then he had to think of a way to do it. "I called two pharmacies near my home, and after a long day of hard work I had pledges for just \$21.00 worth of medicine. Obviously that wasn't going to work. So I called two friends: former U. S. Treasury Secretary William Simon, and Peter Grace, the CEO of the *W.R. Grace Corporation*.

"The three of us met over dinner, and we realized that between us we knew the top decision makers at almost all of the nation's fifty largest pharmaceutical companies. Very quickly we had \$3.5 million worth of medicine for the Pope. And I learned how important it was for relief efforts to act quickly."

According to Macauley, *AmeriCares* accomplished the first relief effort in Poland and delivered one million pounds of powdered milk after a radioactive cloud from the *Chernobyl* nuclear power plant drifted over that country and contaminated their milk supply. "Fifty-five days after we delivered it, a U.S. Senate staffer called and was proud to tell us that Congress had just appropriated 35,000 pounds of milk for Poland. And another organization told me they had formed a committee to study the situation."

Robert Macauley learned the art of spurring others on to love and good deeds from an excellent source—his friend and partner in humanitarian works, Mother Teresa. Thank you letters from her, as well as from other world leaders such as former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, hang on the hallway walls of the *AmeriCares Foundation* headquarters.

Macauley told of the time when he and Mother Teresa were on a plane

to Mexico. As box dinners were being passed out, Mother Teresa asked a flight attendant how much the airline would donate to her charity if she returned her dinner. When she found out, she quickly had everyone, including the crew, returning their dinners. “But it didn’t stop there,” said Macauley. When the plane arrived at its destination, Mother Teresa asked the crew if she could have the dinners they gave back to donate to the poor. And when the airline donated the dinners, she asked to borrow one of their maintenance trucks to deliver them.”

One of the most important lessons of Robert Macauley’s life came when he was much younger and trying to find his way spiritually. For a time he stayed at a monastery in Italy, and on the last night there he spent some time talking with an Italian waiter he had befriended. “He was struggling financially,” said Macauley, “so I gave him some money to help him and his family.

As we looked out over the bay, I asked him about his wife and children. He told me that he, his nine children, his wife and her father and his mother were all living in the same house. I asked him if he had enough money to buy food for dinner that night. He told me that he didn’t. “Then I asked if he ever felt angry or bitter about his misfortune in life, and he shook his head. ‘How can I be sad or bitter when I have this beautiful view and the breeze caressing me and the flowers and the trees? To be sad or bitter when I have all this, then I would have an ungrateful heart.’”

Macauley concluded, “It’s that message that has spurred me forward on all my missions. It inspired me—and still does—that a man who had so little could be so grateful for what little he did have. And now I, who have so much, want to do much for others who have little.”

Isn’t that what the church, and what every Christian who calls Jesus Lord, should be inspired to do, as well? And could it be that the Holy Spirit is working, right now, to try to provoke and spur us, who have so much, to do much for those who have little? If so, shouldn’t we be listening to the Spirit spurring us on, and also try to provoke and spur one another on as Christians?

My friends, at the risk of provoking you to irritation or resentment, I want to ask for your prayers, for me personally and for this faith community of ours. Please pray that I will have the courage, as your pastor, to preach to you, to plead with you, to stir things up and provoke all of us to love and good deeds.

And pray as well that, even at the risk of upsetting or irritating others, we, the members of the First Congregational Church of Scarborough, will love one another enough, and be faithful enough to Christ, to encourage and spur one another on to be all we can be, and everything our Lord is calling us to be, as followers of Jesus. Amen.