

Functional Atheism

John 15:12-17

The First Church of Christ in Hartford, Connecticut

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“We covenant, one with another, to seek and respond to the Word and the will of God.” So begins the second historic Covenant adopted by this Congregation. The first page of our By-Laws contains both the 1632 Covenant, whose language is a bit more flowery, but says the same thing, as well as the more recent one. It might seem odd that in a document meant to lay out how we govern an institution, the first things we read are statements of faith in the form of a Covenant. Covenants, in our faith tradition, are promises, agreements between people or between people and God. Our by-laws, which lay out the nuts and bolts of how we will structure this institution, begin with two versions of the promise that we will, together, “seek and respond to the Word and the will of God.”

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In my 36 years of ministry, I have experienced in a number of churches that often business operates in a spirit of what I call “functional atheism.” In other words, God may be invoked in a quick prayer, but business is business, and we don’t often even want to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit because that might make things messy. We want to do things in an orderly, legally clear, way, often based on “how we have always done things.” Sometimes we invoke tradition more than God, saying things like “well, it’s the Congregational Way.” We talk about being fiscally responsible to our ancestors who built our endowment or the building.

None of these things are bad, necessarily. Unless, that is, we put them in the place above God, which makes them idols. We do

business in church too often the way we do business in the world: forgetting God is always in the midst of us, both here and there!

Here's the deal. Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment in this final conversation with them before his arrest and crucifixion. The centerpiece of their lives going forward was to be this: "love one another as I have loved you." He said it multiple times, so they couldn't miss it. He said the Holy Spirit, the continuing presence of God, would come among them to guide them. He told them to "go and bear fruit that will last," talking about continuing to do what they had been doing with Jesus, transforming people's lives through calling them to repent and receive forgiveness, through healing, through inviting them into a deeper relationship with God that changed everything about how they lived, how they related to religious, business, family, and political institutions, how they used their property, how they related to other people, everywhere in their lives.

Transformed human beings are fruit that lasts, because one person transformed into love impacts so many other people. Generation to generation. It's not about buildings or institutions or endowments, things about which Jesus was generally quite critical! It's about loving **as we have been loved**. Which means going back to remembering God who loves us and building our individual lives and our faith community first on seeking God's presence and God's vision for us in the here and now. Buildings and money and structure and governance all are meant to be in service to God and vehicles for love.

"We covenant one with another to seek and respond to the Word and the will of God." There's a devotional I read every morning which has this prayer in it:

Between each thought and each action

Place the Presence (of God).

Between each encounter and event

Place the Presence (of God). (David Adam in *Celtic Daily*

Prayer, p. 358.

Whatever we do here or out there, in whatever meetings or gatherings or votes or classes or worship or dinners or disagreements or plans, in the midst of those things, we are called to continually recognize and remember the presence of God and not to be functional atheists. That's what this table is for; we eat and drink and take into our very bodies the presence of the Holy Spirit! It's there, but we must open to it, recognize it and listen!

Will you repeat that first line of our Covenant after me, and carry it in your hearts?

We covenant with one another/to seek and respond/to the word and the will of God. Amen.