

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC  
September 10, 2017 Rally Sunday  
Rev. Kevin M Smith  
Matthew 18:18-20

*This Is Not the Secret Service*

Welcome, everyone to Rally Sunday! I've often wondered since arriving at Maple Street Church almost seven years ago if people who don't know this church see our announcements for Rally Sunday and think we're offering a cheerleader rally team clinic in church or, perhaps, some kind of NASCAR race! What is it that we rally around any way on this Sunday every year? Why is it we are here?

*A friend in front of me was coming out of the church one day, and the preacher was standing at the door as he always did to shake hands. He grabbed my friend by the hand and pulled him aside.*

*Then the pastor said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!"*

*The friend replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor."*

*Pastor questioned him, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?"*

*He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."*

*(<http://www.pastoralcareinc.com/resources/sermon-helps/jokes-for-sermons/>)*

Well, whatever Rally Sunday means I'm glad you all are not in the secret service. For there is nothing about the love of God or the love of neighbor that we should keep secret. We should feel blessed every day that there is a God who loves us, inspires us, and teaches us to love our neighbors and ourselves. We should be so thankful that we tell our neighbors and invite them in to share in the love.

A friend of mine once told me when we were having a wonderful chat about his faith that he didn't go to any kind of services after I had inquired about what kind of services his faith held. He said, "Well, Kevin, I'm a sole practitioner." I try my best not to be too judgmental about other people's faith practices unless they injure people in some way. But, I'm sure glad that here at Maple Street Church a huge part of the joy of our faith is coming together in community and sharing ourselves with each other and with God in a communal and public way.

Still, there are sometimes when I ponder, “why are we doing what we are doing here?”

Have you ever thought about that?

I’m guessing if I asked each one of you right now what you are doing here and why you are involved in church we would probably here many diverse answers. For some it would be about having community, for others they like this beautiful sanctuary, some like the “prayer-conditioned” chapel, some like that we serve gluten free communion wafers, some because they just going to committee meetings, and others like the free food! I’m sure every one of you would say, “Wow, I just wouldn’t want to miss one of Kevin’s sermons!”

Still, it’s good every now and then for each one of us to ponder why it is that we go to church anyway. My friends, there are a whole bunch of folks across this town, this state, in New England, and across this country that no longer go to church or never went in the first place. In fact, I think New England now has the dubious distinction of being the least church-going population in the country.

I say this not to scare you or make you doubt your faith. Far from it. In fact, I really hope you will not base your church-going practice on how many people you see sitting in the pews this morning or any Sunday morning. Because if that is why we are doing things here at church, the tide of the current culture is against us. Also, fear of something only works so long when you are trying to inspire people to do something. I don’t believe in using fear to inspire people like many politicians do.

Jesus Christ did establish a church. But his church didn’t have four walls and pews. His church resided in the people who followed him. *The people were the church.* And, he never sat in a building concocting schemes to try to get people into the non-existent pews. Jesus established people—real flesh and blood people—as his church because it is through people reaching out and connecting with one another, and people feeding each other the spiritual nourishment they needed. He sought out the sinner, the different, the outcast, the poor, the lame, the doubters, and those who failed miserably. In fact, the flesh and blood cornerstone that he built his church upon was a huge failure who betrayed him when he was arrested and crucified. Jesus turned expectations on their head. Jesus, my friends, was a counter-cultural prophet and connector of human hearts.

This “Rally,” or regathering, Sunday begins one of the most important church seasons in the life of all of you—the people of Maple Street Church. We need each and everyone one of you to search your heart and mind and truly know why it is you are coming to church. Why is it that you need to be with a group of people who come together not over a game of bridge, not over a rock concert, not just to be entertained. You are part of a group of people sitting here this morning that I dearly hope are here because you feel something deep inside of you that yearns to know God and be known by God. You yearn for more depth in your life than just what you do at work, or at school, or at play, or at the club you happen to belong to now. You learn to find meaning in your life by serving this loving, but somewhat mysterious Spirit that you feel connected to who is silently, or perhaps not so quietly, urging you to be the best person you can be by loving others, by being unselfish, by helping find justice for the oppressed, by helping those out who perhaps were not born with the same privileges you were born with, or whatever can make you feel you are able to transcend yourself and your limitations every now and then by loving others.

Your Vision Team needs to hear from you about what you want this church to be in the next five, ten, or twenty years. Talk to them, email them at [mscvisionteam@gmail.com](mailto:mscvisionteam@gmail.com), visit the Maple Street Church Vision Facebook page. And, please do not miss the four “all-congregation” meetings we will be holding this year. Your voice, your spirit, your hopes and dreams count and are needed. We are asking to know your hopes and dreams for the church.

In this precarious time for churches in this land, let us not fear to dream big dreams about how the church—that means people who come here—can once again begin to feed the needs of all the people who do not come to this church. My friends, if we are not relevant to the people outside those sanctuary doors then we need to do something different. Please join together, pray together, think outside this box and think courageously together about how to be the church of living people that Jesus walked, visiting, prayed, inspired, challenged, and yes, lived and died for on that cross. We are indeed gathered in his name. Amen.