

## “What Christmas Makes Possible”

A Sermon by Don Cummings  
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When I began my professional ministry after graduating from seminary in 1972, it was a heady time for Christianity.

The Jesus movement was going strong on the west coast. Jesus Christ Superstar and Godspell were runaway successes on Broadway and both were made into motion pictures. Spontaneous, sustained revivals broke out on several campuses of Christian colleges across the country, including our own at Asbury College. The Christian faith was experiencing a resurgence that captured the attention of the secular media.

Forty years later, as I was retiring from full-time ministry, the picture had changed dramatically, and for the worse. Mainline denominations which had played such an integral role in the shaping of America and reached their peak in numbers and influence in the 1950's and early 1960's have been in decline for my entire ministerial career. Christianity is no longer welcome in the marketplace. The separation of church and state doctrine has been interpreted in tortured ways that many believe undermine the intent of the nation's founders. A list of woes could go on for some time, but suffice it to say that a young pastor who started out in 1972 with hope and enthusiasm ended his career 40 years later battered and discouraged, feeling that he had little left to offer a world that was turning its back on matters of faith and religious institutions as fast as it could.

During my two years of full retirement, I gave a lot of thought to what the church has to offer people that no other institution in our society can or does offer.

I wondered if there was anything that makes the church an indispensable entity in our society?

I thought it isn't our fellowship.  
People can find all kinds of fellowship in all kinds of venues.

It isn't our activities.  
There was a time when the church was about the only game in town, especially in small communities—where the church was THE social gathering place.

Today people are inundated with opportunities for all kinds of activities from sports to entertainment to video games to an ever expanding array of diversions.

It isn't our study groups.  
Educational opportunities abound from a wide range of sources:  
  
the local library  
the community college  
interest groups in the area  
online college degrees  
etc.

It isn't our compassionate ministries: feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, helping widows and orphans.

Community groups and civic organizations, students at all levels of the educational system, and non-profit—non-religious organizations of all kinds lend a hand in caring for the least and the lost. Even atheists remind us that you don't have to be a person of faith to want to help the less fortunate.

It isn't the Arts.

Time was the church was a major patron of the Arts. In the middle ages, the Roman Catholic Church was noted for its commitment to the Arts in service of the faith.

Today, the Arts and artists have many patrons and the church is no longer the major center for culture and artistic expression in the community.

It isn't our preaching.

There are so many taking heads in so many places these days, people are nigh unto sick of them all.

You can find someone spouting off about any topic you want to know about and lot of topics you don't want to know about on Fox, MSNBC, CNBC, endless internet blogs, conservative radio, liberal radio. You name it. You can find it.

It isn't even our prayers.

We encourage people to pray any where, all the time. And today there are myriad traditions of prayer, some of which are not church-related at all.

As valuable as all of these things are, as important as it is for every congregation to be involved in providing all of these ministries and activities and opportunities, none of them are what the church alone is able to offer people in our society.

So, I wondered, is there anything that the church alone offers, that people cannot receive from any where else, from any other organization or institution? Something that makes the church indispensable to human life?

I realized there is one thing the church has that it alone offers people in our society. No other institution or group does or can offer this.

The church offers the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

Holy Communion offers the opportunity to examine one's life before God, confess one's sins, be forgiven, be forgiving, and receive a new start in life—on a weekly basis.

Where else in our society can people go for this kind of opportunity? The church alone is ordained by God to offer this sacrament.

So let's be proactive about inviting people to come to church. Let's create a safe environment in which they can experience the dangerous, life-changing grace of God.

Let's be who God ordained the church to be—a community of faith where people can seek and receive the forgiveness of God through the means of grace which the church alone provides.

Let's be that place where people can come in burdened with life's cares, concerns and failures, and walk out with a new lease on life.

If we are that kind of place, why wouldn't anyone want to receive what God can offer through us?

There's hope for the church and for human society after all!

And Christmas is what makes this possible, because if Jesus had not been born, we wouldn't be celebrating Holy Communion this Sunday, nor any Sunday.

So, go, tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.