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Title: Our Soul Longs to draw closer to God

Text: Matthew 28: 18-20 Psalm 84

My topic for these next few weeks is: Why Church? It might seem strange topic for now in the sense that when we say “church” we usually think building. Congregations have spent the last four months out of the building. Why am I talking about why church is important to you, if you aren’t in church ?

Here’s my thought pattern: I began by pondering those words from the end of Matthew’s gospel where Jesus speaks to his disciples and gives what we call “ the great commission”

Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you, and remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”

Scholars speculate that this verse was actually added later as the early church came to understand their mission in sharing God’s love with all people. Followers of Jesus are to share his teachings. Make disciples; a disciple is a student; we are to make students of Jesus. Usually, by that we read, we are to invite others to come to church. I hope you will live out the words of the great commission, but before you are launched out to make disciples of the whole world, I figured we should spend some time asking ourselves a question: Why? Why church? Why do you come to church? Why do you miss church? Why you tune in for virtual church? Why would you invite someone else to do so?

I imagine a conversations going like this:

Imagine two people are working out at the gym, or sitting in the office, or talking on the phone - you set the scene according to your day.

One says to the other:

“hey, I’m headed out to the lake, golf course, basketball court on Sunday morning, want to come with me?”

The second person says:

“Oh, how about later. I have church on Sunday morning.”

The first person looks surprised and says:

“You go to church? Why?”

The second person (that’s you) has a blank look and says, “uuuhh..”

Part of being a follower of Jesus, is sharing your *why* with others. If you haven’t thought about why church is important to you, you can’t tell anyone else. If you have thought about that question before it is asked, seriously, why do you tune in? It is going to be helpful not just in answering for someone else, but bringing your WHY to your awareness is ultimately going to be meaningful to you, and your worship experience, and our worship.

When I started thinking about all this, and being the Thinker- type that I am, I began with research. I found my data two ways. One, I searched for on-line quantifiable research. I wanted to see data gathered from scientific statistical research practices. Second, I sent an informal email to a sampling of folks from Saint Paul asking their Why church? first thought that comes to mind. The professional research found that the #1 answer

81% of participants gave their reason for going to church: to become closer to God. The random email sampling I did which was totally unscientific, reflected much the same. People come to church to get closer to God.

Then I had to ask myself, how does church help us become closer to God? I would love it if everyone coming to church would have theophany (a direct experience of God) every Sunday. I would love it if we could open the doors and pack this place (it seats 900) and every single one would have a literal, burning bush, parting of the seas, vision of Christ talking to you, a bright blinding light dropping you to the ground -standing on holy ground, experience of God every Sunday morning precisely during our worship service. I think if we could guarantee that anyone who would walk in the door would receive existential proof of God, the room would be packed - regardless of the pandemic. I really don't expect every one to have a full on theophany every Sunday; maybe I need to raise my expectations, and see what the Holy Spirit will do.

I went to a church retreat years ago whose goal I later learned was for every participant to have a God moment that weekend. The retreat was designed to do that. Our watches/clocks/phones were taken away. We were told not to worry about time, our leaders would take care of everything. Leaders would tell us to take a "short break" or a "longer break" Don't worry about time, they will come get us when it's time for us to be somewhere. They fed us more than we needed, more often than we needed. We had no family contacts. We were sleep deprived as we rose in the dark to go to sunrise prayer and were up late for midnight vigils. Presentations were made which usually involved tearful, heart wrenching stories all set in a context of love, love, agape, food, hugs and Jesus everywhere. Later I learned, the leaders would meet after the participants had gone to bed to share updates on which participant had 'broke' or were close to it. It was all done with lots of hard work and dedication and good intentions from the leadership team, but it was all very orchestrated -some may even call it manipulated- in hopes that everyone have their God moment in this intense weekend. That's not my hopes for church.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodist movement, grew up a preachers kid. He was in church all his life. He went to seminary and became a priest. He was 35 years old when he went to a church service and described feeling his heart "strangely warmed" like no other time in his life. Martin Luther spent years of study; became a priest himself, a professor of theology, composer, monk and a seminal figure in the Protestant Reformation. He too had his God moment later in life. Practically every theologian, priest, prophet I've read about or known can tell of a special God-moment usually coming after years of ministry and study and worship. Not one of the great spiritual leaders or mystic saints describes a God encounter as an every Sunday event.

I believe in God experiences. I believe The veil between this world and another is parted for true theophanies. I believe heart-stopping exhilarating face to face, soul wide open experiences of the Holy. Those times are precious, sacred, and will ground your faith and feed your soul for a life-time -which is really good, because often they happen maybe once in

a lifetime and typically they are not on schedule to happen every Sunday when the clock strikes time for church service begins.

So if our coming to church is not an artificial forced experience, and if I can't guarantee that you are going to have your personal encounter with the God of the Universe during our time together, I go back to the question - how does church - help us 'feel closer to God'?

Gathering for worship creates a space in our week that is sacred. Sacred means set apart. It is a marker of intentionality. It is making time, setting a date in this relationship between you and the Creator of the Universe. Every date with your special someone in your life might not rock your world, but you make intentional time to be with people you love especially if you are nurturing a relationship whether start-up or seasoned.

We feel closer to God just by showing up for our date, by setting an intention, by honoring a priority in our life to seek this God connection.

The elements of our time together help set apart this time for us each week to become closer to God. In **scripture**, we hear how others have experienced God. We read stories of those who have had life-altering, thin place experiences. Reading, listening, hearing about others who have had those intimate God experiences and trusting in their witness can be a window to experience God ourselves. In worship we hear the **Word proclaimed** - helps if preachers and lay speakers vulnerably, humbly attempt to share a glimpse into ancient texts, to share but a sliver of a crack into what our faith ancestors attempted to record for us of their own God- moments, questions, visions.

We gather in worship to share sacraments, "means of grace" as Wesley called them. We share together in experiencing God through our **baptism** and remembering our baptism and touching the living water that flows in all our lives, saturating all our body. We can experience God through sharing in **holy communion** where common elements of the earth are blessed and broken to connect us with the holy and with others on the path to the holy through the bread and cup in the mystery of our faith where God, Christ, all others of all times, and places are ONE.

We gather in worship with **music** to share in an ancient hymn of praise, to sing and hear modern flowing melodies. Music touches the heart and opens the soul in a profound way that stays with us like nothing else. We gather in **prayer** time, in the quiet lighting candles there is heart space to pour out and to be filled up.

Worship not about a performance or going to a production, it is about opening ourselves, coming together with our hearts and souls ready that we may connect with bits of divinity or bold explosions of love. Ancient people worshiped. Earliest people and have ever since. I believe humans have an innate desire, longing for that which is more than.

The Psalmist proclaims

"How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the Lord:  
My heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God. ... *Psalm 84*

We humans join with all creation, in a holy longing for our Creator. We see the stars, the clouds, the mountains, the ocean, the horizon. We hear the birds singing and deep inside we know. We know that there is more here than me more there than this plane of existence. We have a longing to connect with the More Than. We search to connect/ return in relationship to our Creator, our eternal home, soul giving, life force of Love.

Worship is always a focus on the OTHER, coming to church is pointing us to the Holy God of all. When we truly open ourselves to worship, we regain the finest part of what we are, images of the divine. Is worship/is God confined to Sunday morning at a set time, or in a set place? Of course not. Can we connect with God outside the church? Absolutely! So why church?

Our worship reminds us, feeds us, grounds us, inspires us, teaches us. Opens our eyes, hearts and minds so that , we may better be aware to perceive the Holy Divine in every day, in every moment and place and to be ready to experience God's revelation to us wherever it may be.

May we worship, with hearts open, expectant and excited to train the eyes of our hearts for a holy life each day.