

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – September 2, 2018

Hymns: Bless the Lord, O My Soul; 575 – Lead me, Lord; 484 – The church is wherever; 472 – We are God’s people

Scripture: John 18:19-21; Hebrews 10:24-25

Sermon Title: “Do you?”

John 18:19-21 (New Living Translation - NLT)

The high priest began asking Jesus about his followers and what he had been teaching them. Jesus replied, “Everyone knows what I teach. I have preached regularly in the synagogues and the Temple, where the people gather. I have not spoken in secret. Why are you asking me this question? Ask those who heard me. They know what I said.”

Hebrews 10:24-25 (CEV)

We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord’s coming is getting closer.

“I don’t have to go to church to worship God. I can worship God just as well on the golf course.” Three times this summer, people said this to me, usually right after finding out I am a Presbyterian minister. And three times, I gave the same response: “But do you?” This reply was often met with a stunned silence. In one instance, I continued on to say, “I’ve heard God’s name invoked by golfers on many occasions, but seldom in a positive manner, and usually after a bad shot.”

One fellow persisted. “My point is,” he said, “you don’t have to go to church to worship God, you can worship God just as well in the out-of-doors.”

“Of course, that’s true,” I said, “the building is immaterial. It is the intentional setting aside of time to worship, the focus upon God for that time, the communication with God through prayer, Scripture and reflection, and the gathering together with the community of faith to engage in service and discipleship which count, not the building. If you do that in the out of doors, or even on a golf course, then you’re correct; you don’t have to go to church to worship God. But the question remains: Do you?”

Now the fellow was getting defensive. He had expected to score a quick and easy point on an unsuspecting clergyman, as well as justifying his non-attendance, and now he was engaged in a conversation of greater depth than he anticipated. “Well, it doesn’t say anywhere in the Bible that you have to go to church to be a Christian.”

“Sure it does, countless times. The New Testament is filled with examples of the believers gathering together for worship, often at great personal risk. The books of the New Testament are written both within and to particular communities of faith. One letter, known as ‘Hebrews,’ specifically warns against failing to gather in worship. It was understood that without the support of a community of believers, a person’s faith would greatly struggle to survive.”

“So you’re telling me that I have to go to church,” the fellow said.

“No, I’m inviting you to come to church,” I responded. “And I hope you will. I’m sure you’ll find it a blessing.”

I hope he did. And I hope you do, too. Because while it is true that you can praise God while enjoying the world of nature, that you can draw close to God while paddling a canoe on a quiet lake – the Psalms, after all, are filled with nature expressing the Glory of God – the question is, “Do you?”

The fact is, God has called us to be together, to be a family, a community of faith. God has called us to be together, to worship together, to work together for the glory of the Kingdom of God. The early church of which we read in the New Testament could not conceive of not attending regular Sabbath worship; the faithful throughout the centuries regarded worship as not only an obligation, but as the central focus of their lives.

Jesus set the example. As a faithful Jew, he attended Synagogue every Sabbath, often being invited to teach, once word had gotten around. All the Gospels regularly report that Jesus “*taught regularly in the synagogues,*” “*taught in the synagogues throughout Galilee,*” and, most tellingly, Luke records (Luke 4:16), “*When he came to the village of Nazareth, his boyhood home, he went **as usual** to the synagogue on the Sabbath.*” Synagogue, by the way, means “the place of gathering.” The word “church,” which we use, has its root in the word “ekklesia,” which means “the call to gather.” Synagogue, and church, both mean the place where people gather together. And in the context of the New Testament, it is where people gather to worship God and to hear and learn the Scriptures, and draw closer together in faith. And that’s where Jesus went. “*As usual.*”

Our Gospel reading from John takes place when Jesus was being interrogated by the High Priest about what Jesus was actually teaching. Jesus’ response? “*Everyone knows what I teach. I have preached regularly in the synagogues and the Temple, where the people gather.*” “You knew where to find me each week, and many other times besides,” says Jesus. “Ask anyone. I was in the synagogues. I was at the Temple.” We have to put out of our popular imagination the idea that Jesus was out on his own,

preaching in lonely barren places, far from any form of what is not derogatorily called “organised religion.” On the contrary, Jesus was right there, in the thick of it. Every week.

And so were his followers! It was inconceivable to the early Christians to not gather together in worship. On the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the church in great power, where are the believers? “*gathered together in one place.*” Same thing it says in the chapter before, and in the chapters after. As Luke, the writer of the Gospel and of the Book of Acts, sums up (Acts 2:46-47): “*They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.*”

This became the basic template. Twenty or so years later, as Luke writes about the missionary journeys of Paul, we hear how new communities of faith were established: “*Paul and Barnabas also appointed elders in every church... Upon arriving in Antioch, they called the church together and reported everything God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles, too.*” (14:21-27)

The establishment of communities of faith who gathered regularly in worship is a cornerstone of the New Testament. And if you think the New Testament is somehow not presenting a realistic view of how Early Christianity worked, then we have numerous writings saying exactly the same thing, the earliest of which is known as “The Didache,” or “The Teaching of the Apostles.” The Didache is earliest manual of Christian belief and practice outside of the New Testament itself, outlining the basics of the Christian life, such as Baptism, Communion, the support of church workers, and more. And at the centre of it all is this: “*Every Lord’s Day, gather yourselves together.*”

Even sources hostile to Christianity speak of the believers meeting regularly for worship. For instance, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia, wrote a letter to the Emperor Trajan around AD 110. After outlining how he had put numerous Christians to the sword for their faith, he reports that despite official persecution, “*They were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to the solemn oath, not to do any wicked deeds, and never to deny a truth when they should be called upon to deliver it up*” (Epistles, X, 96). Christians, even under threat of death, continued to regularly gather for worship and praise of God.

We don’t have only literary evidence for church being an indispensable part of the Christian life. Archaeology also testifies, through the very stones of which the earliest churches were built, that gathering together was central to the faith.

Many of you have heard of the Catacombs in Rome, where Christians assembled out of sight of the authorities. Regulars at Zion will have heard me speak of Peter's house in Capernaum, where Jesus lived for several years. Believers continued to meet there from the earliest days, and the house was converted to a place of gathering and worship very early in the Christian era. It was eventually expanded into quite a large facility.

The "house church" was typical in the early days, when Christianity was still a fledgling, underground movement. The New Testament speaks of many such house churches – most of which mentioned are the homes of women of means! John Mark's mother Mary (Acts 12), Lydia (Acts 15), Prisca and her husband Aquila (Romans 16), Nympha (Colossians 4), and Apphia and her husband Philemon (Philemon 1,2) all hosted churches in their homes. In communities where Christianity was tolerated, such as Ephesus, lecture halls were rented for larger gatherings (Acts 19:9).

When, in the early 300s, the Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be no longer illegal, Christians were finally able to construct purpose-built houses of worship, often where they had already long been gathering in less formal buildings or significant sites. Two of the oldest churches in the world still in constant use were initially constructed in those early days – the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre at the site of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. To visit these churches is to step back in time, and to feel the strong link across the centuries to the Christians who gathered long ago.

What was it that compelled our forefathers and mothers in the faith to gather together, week after week, Sunday by Sunday, often at great distance, great effort, and great risk? After all, if you think it is tough for us to make our way to church on a Sunday morning, imagine doing so with the prospect of arrest, imprisonment or even death? Or, not even going so far back, our own immediate ancestors on PEI and elsewhere, making their way to church by foot or horse cart or sleigh many miles, on poor roads (if any) or through bone-chilling winds? And that's well within the memory of some of you here!

Or in a more sobering thought, what of those Christians today living in countries which are hostile to the faith? We hear of bombings of churches in Egypt, Pakistan, India, and more, causing great loss of life and trauma to people gathered in worship – yet still they come. Why?

They needed to gather for worship and praise because they were in relationship with the God who created them, loved them, who gave them the gift of life and the gift of life eternal. They wanted, needed, to express praise and thanksgiving to God, so that their relationship with God would be strengthened, would grow. They wanted, needed,

to learn more of the love of God in Jesus Christ, to hear the words he spoke, the miracles he performed, the deeds of forgiveness and kindness which transformed lives such as theirs.

Further, they heeded the words of Jesus, when he said (Matthew 18:20), “*Where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*” They knew that Jesus, through the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives, was present with them, even when alone; but they knew too, as Jesus had said, that when the family of faith gather together in his name for worship and for service, that Jesus is among them in a different, deeper, stronger way; that being together with fellow believers strengthened and affirmed their faith; that learning with fellow believers deepened their faith; that being together with fellow believers, encouraging one another, helped them to maintain their faith, through times of even the greatest struggle.

They knew, and I think we know too, that it is all too easy to fall away from the faith. It is all too easy to allow the distractions of our world to overwhelm us, to absorb all our energy and time, to lead us away. Without the commitment and support of regular worship, our faith can quickly wither, grow dormant, die.

So important was the gathering together of the faithful for the maintenance of the faith, that to prevent someone coming to church was, in the words of the Apostle Paul, to “*give them over to the Devil.*” There were, in Corinth, some who attended worship, but who were causing division among the believers, and disrepute within the wider community. Paul instructs the congregation to cease to associate with these people, until they change their destructive ways. Then the church is to welcome them back into the fellowship with forgiveness and love, lest these once-hurtful people themselves become, as Paul writes, “*overcome with excessive sorrow (1 Corinthians 5:1-11).*”

Being part of a community of faith provides us with opportunities to serve God through serving one another, opportunities which we would never have on our own. I can make a long list of people who tell me how their lives were enriched through participation in the life of the church, whether serving on a committee, volunteering for a job which needs doing, being on the Board or Session, teaching Sunday School, participating in Pastoral Care, or any other of the dozens of activities available to us. It also allows us to join our efforts together, and to make contributions the sum of which are far greater than the parts.

For instance, over the past 10 years, we as a congregation, working with local farmers, landowners and sponsors, have provided over a million meals for the hungry, through our participation in the Canadian FoodGrains Bank. It would be inconceivable to do something of such magnitude on our own, but together, we have done it, and continue to do more.

I came across an obituary this past week in Biblical Archaeological Review for a philanthropist named Eugene Grant. His one hundred years were lived with this three-pronged prescription for a good life: “Do something meaningful, be involved in a community, and give love.” That’s a pretty good summary of what we are called to do as believers, and as full participants in a family of faith.

We gather for worship because we are in relationship with the God who created us, loves us, who has given us the gift of life and the gift of life eternal. We gather for worship because when we do, Jesus is among us in a real and powerful way. We gather for worship to learn from, encourage, and strengthen one another in our faith. We gather for worship to serve God through serving one another, uniting our efforts to make a real difference in our community and our world. We gather for worship so that we too might “Do something meaningful, be involved in a community, and give love.” For all these reasons and more, we gather for worship. As Christians, we always have. And if our faith is to remain, we always will.

But perhaps it all boils down to this. The Gospel of John records an unhappy scene (John 6:60-69): many disciples of Jesus are finding it tough going. The demands are too great. The desire to return to their old life is too strong. They turn away. They stop following Jesus. Jesus turns to stubborn Peter, who is still hanging around. *“You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”*

We gather for worship because it is in Jesus, and only in Jesus, that we find the words of love, of forgiveness, of eternal life.

I leave you with the words of the New Testament book known as The Letter to the Hebrews. The writer was preaching the same sermon I am, it seems, and they conclude with words much better than mine (*Hebrews 10:24-25*):

We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord’s coming is getting closer

Make regular participation at worship a priority this fall, for you and your family. Invite others to do the same! They will thank you for the invitation. Don’t miss the chance to spend time together in worship, in service, in encouragement, and in the love of the God who made and loves us all. We’re open every Sunday! And you don’t need a set of clubs to play. Amen.