

“Why Do We Need Church Anyway?” I Cor. 12:12-14, 27; Heb. 10:23-25; Matt. 5:14-16 11/17/19

A few years back, a 7 year-old boy in Plain City, Utah hopped in his parents' car on a Sunday morning, pulled out of the driveway, and took off down the road. Calls to the authorities about an erratic driver led the police to the white Dodge Intrepid. They used their sirens and lights, but the boy refused to pull over. It was a slow chase, with constantly changing speeds as the boy would scoot down to push on the gas, and then sit up to see where he was going! The chase ended when the boy pulled back into his own driveway. When asked why he had done it, the boy stated that he really didn't want to go to church that morning!

Apparently, this young boy is not alone in wanting to avoid church, as those attending church regularly are now a minority in our country, although most folks don't go to such extreme lengths to avoid going! All of which raises an important question: Why do we need church anyway? You've probably heard people say that they can pray or worship on the golf course or hiking in the woods or at home watching a service on TV or on livestream. And that is true, though I do wonder how often they actually pray and worship on the front nine! However, there are some important parts of church that even a good walk in the woods would miss. Let's look at three of them together.

First, church isn't so much a place to go as a group of people who gather under the leadership of Jesus Christ to carry out his work. The Apostle Paul's favorite metaphor for the church was the human body, with Jesus Christ as its head. ¹²*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.* ¹³*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.* ¹⁴*Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.* ²⁷*Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* (I Cor. 12:12-14, 27)

Just as the human body has many parts and all of them are important, so it is with the Body of Christ. Each part is important, and God has arranged the parts to accomplish his purposes. If any parts are missing, the body will be handicapped in some way. So, one important reason to be in church is that you are needed! There is a role for you here, as together we seek to do God's work here at GPC and in the world.

A Google Android ad from a few years back demonstrates this truth in another way. A pianist alternates between two pianos as he plays a Beethoven Sonata- one, a standard instrument, and the other with all the keys tuned to the same note! Take a look. (SHOW MONOTUNE AD)

“Together, but not the same.” A piano makes a good image for the church. All 88 keys are needed, if God, the pianist, is to play the music he wrote! Without each of you, it just won’t be what the Creator intended, for you are one of those needed keys. That’s why the church needs you and you need the church!

Second, an important role of the church is to spiritually form us in the midst of a world that is trying to form us in other ways, as Lou reminded us last week. Listen to these words from Paul in Romans 12. *I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.* (Rom. 12:1,2)

Here, Paul calls us to avoid conformity with the world- a world that is trying to convince us that spiritual needs can be met through material things or political changes or through a host of things other than our Creator. If you doubt that the world is trying to do that, just watch the Black Friday ads popping up everywhere! The church is the place that helps us resist that conformity of thought, by renewing our minds as we read and hear the Word of God proclaimed. The writer of Hebrews puts it another way.

²³*Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.* ²⁴*And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,* ²⁵*not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* (Hebr. 10:23-25) Here, the writer calls out those who have been “neglecting to meet together,” because part of what we do when we gather is to “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” I really like that phrase- “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” Left to our own devices, we tend to turn inward and chase after selfish pursuits. But when we gather, we provoke one another to look outside ourselves “to love and good deeds!” We need that. Being in church changes us and makes us more like Jesus, which is the second reason we gather together.

The final reason is found in Matt. 5. Jesus said, ¹⁴*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.* ¹⁵*No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house.* ¹⁶*In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.* (Matt. 5:14-16) Jesus says that we should let our light shine so others will be drawn to God. Part of the way we do that is in the way we interact with one another as the church, enacting those Christian virtues we talk about.

When I was a youth director, Mike started coming to our group. Mike was a different kind of kid, difficult to talk to, and just odd. Today, we'd probably say he was somewhere on the autism spectrum. Part of my goal as a youth director was to find a way for every kid who came to our group to contribute in some way- trying to live out that biblical teaching about the Body of Christ needing all of its parts. That was a challenge with Mike, but we learned that he was pretty good with technical stuff, so we had him run sound and projectors for us. Later, we discovered that he played the keyboard, and we invited him to play with our singing sometimes, although it was challenging, because he played better alone than with a group! I also noticed that some of our student leaders reached out to him and befriended him. But we had no idea if any of this was having any impact on him.

The spring of Mike's senior year, we had a retreat. The last night, around a campfire, we invited our seniors to say anything to the group they would like to say. Mike went last. I was surprised he was willing to say anything at all! In his halting way he told us that he really appreciated the youth group, because it was the only place he had ever been where he felt accepted and cared for. People didn't treat him well at school, but at youth group they did. He said a couple other off-the-wall things, too, but I was really moved by his comments. The church should be the place where the

Mikes of this world can feel accepted, cared for, and valued. And Mike's teachers and counselors and parents all heard from him about how the Presbyterian Church was a place where Mike- even Mike!- was loved. That's being light in the world.

In several of his letters, the Apostle Paul talked about how in the ancient church it didn't matter if you were male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile. It didn't even matter if you were a slave or free. And all those groups were represented in the early church! Paul said that in the church none of that matters since we are all are one in Jesus Christ. That's because we all come to God on the same basis- sinners saved by God's grace. I think if he were writing today Paul would say that it doesn't matter if you're white or a person of color, homeless or living in luxury, Democrat or Republican, a Mayflower descendant or a recent immigrant- because we are all one in Christ and have value as people made in the very image of God. If we could truly live that way, we would indeed stand out in a culture that has deep divisions along all those lines. We would be the light Jesus talked about.

My grandfather spent most of his career as a manager at the Potomac Edison Electric Company in Hagerstown, MD. One day his boss called him to come down to his office, because there was someone there he wanted him to meet. On the way there, he noticed all the other

managers walking in the same direction. They wondered together about who this person might be who they were going to meet.

It turned out to be Thomas Edison himself. He was traveling through the area and saw the building with his name on it. He decided to go inside and check it out to see how well they were representing his name!

I wonder, if Jesus were to wander into our building in the flesh, if he would be pleased with how we're representing his name. Being the light he called us to be. Being constantly changed within, formed into his ways, rather than the ways of the world, with each one of us who is a part of Christ's body is doing his or her part on behalf of the whole body. That's why we need church. To be the people Jesus is calling us to be.