

January 17, 2010

## WHY WE GO TO CHURCH

*“Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’” Isaiah 6:8*

Going to church is a habit and not going to church is a habit. Going to church is also a sacred promise. All of us who are members of the church promised God that we would support the church with our presence. We promised God we would be here. We promised God that attending church regularly and faithfully would be a top priority in our lives and in our schedules.

Last weekend I watched the National Football League playoff games. Two of the four games played last weekend were played in Cincinnati and New England. Both stadiums were jam-packed despite the fact that temperatures were well below freezing. Fans sat out in the cold for more than three hours to support their football teams.

Let me ask you something? Are you that loyal to your church? How are you doing really in your church attendance? How faithful are you?

Let me put that in perspective by asking you some questions:

If your car would start one out of three times, would you consider it faithful?

If your television worked sixty percent of the times, would you consider it faithful?

If your newspaper delivery person should skip your house every other day, would you call that faithful?

If your water heater should greet you with cold water in your shower or bath three mornings a week, would it be faithful?

If you should fail to come to work five or six days each month, would your employer consider you faithful?

If you should miss a couple of house payments in a year, would your mortgage holder say, “Oh, well, ten out of twelve months; that’s not too bad!”

If you attend church once or twice a month – 25 to 50 percent of the time – would you say that you are faithful?

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It is something to think about, isn't it? Now then, with all of this as a backdrop for our thinking, let me give you my list of three reasons why we go to church; three reasons for going to church faithfully that explode out of our Scripture lesson in Isaiah, chapter six. In this powerful story, we see the prophet Isaiah experiencing the presence of God in the Temple in a life-changing way, and out of that experience, he senses the importance of three dramatic things:

a right relationship with God, a right respect for other people, and a right reason for living.

And that is precisely what worship does for us. Let's take a look at these together, one at a time.

**FIRST, GOING TO CHURCH CALLS US TO A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. IT DRAWS US CLOSER TO GOD.** Isaiah came to "church" that day, and he had one of those mountaintop experiences with God; an experience much too powerful to express in words; an experience that drew him closer than ever into a right relationship with God.

Put that over against this. Do you remember how in the New Testament right after the miracle of Easter, the risen Lord appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room and they were absolutely bowled over by this incredible experience of seeing with their own eyes the resurrected Christ. He had defeated sin and death, the most amazing miracle of all time, the greatest news of all time and together as a family the disciples all experienced it – all, that is, except Thomas.

Thomas missed it for one reason. He was not there. He was absent.

Now, of course, we know in his grace and compassion, the risen Lord came back and appeared again later, just for Thomas. But it's a haunting story, isn't it? There's a sermon there somewhere and I think it has to do with this: how many great moments with God have you missed? How many life-changing moments with God have you missed simply because you weren't there, simply because you were absent from church, simply because you haven't really made up your mind yet to really commit your life to God and the church?

There's a great story about Dr. Stuart Henry, professor emeritus at Duke University. He taught American Christianity there for many years. Dr. Henry was

walking across the Duke campus on Sunday morning and the bells in the chapel tower were ringing loudly up ahead. He was dressed in his Sunday best and he was walking briskly as if not to be late for the opening of the service.

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A student saw him and said, “Hi there, Dr. Henry. Did you decide that you would go to church this morning?” Dr. Henry kept walking and said, “No, I didn’t decide to do that this morning.” The student looked puzzled. “Oh, I’m sorry,” the student said. “I could have sworn you were going to chapel.” “I am,” Dr. Henry said, “but I didn’t decide to go this morning.” The student, somewhat baffled, said, “Oh, I guess I don’t understand.”

And Dr. Henry replied, “Look, son, I didn’t make the decision to go to church this morning. I made that decision more than fifty years ago when I first became a Christian. So, it is never a decision whether I’ll go to church, but only a decision of where I’ll go to church.”

Isn’t that great? Dr. Henry just settled it once and for all a long time ago. He said, I’m a Christian, I go to church, and it makes my life happier and fuller and more exciting than ever before.”

It’s really so simple, and it saves a lot of time and energy. Just make the decision one time. You don’t have to grapple with that every week. “Do you go to church?” “Of course I do. I’m a Christian!”

Let me ask you something. Have you done that? Have you made that decision to trust God, and to put him and the church at the top of your priority list? Have you decided once and for all to support God and the church with your presence in worship every Sunday?

As Isaiah learned many years ago, going to church will draw us closer to God and will give us amazing spiritual strength. As someone said, “We don’t keep the Sabbath; the Sabbath keeps us.”

**SECOND, GOING TO CHURCH CALLS US TO A RIGHT RESPECT FOR OTHER PEOPLE.** In church that day, Isaiah became concerned about the people. He wanted to reach out and help them. Church at its best makes us more compassionate people.

Statistics show that people who go to church regularly are happier and more satisfied than those who don’t. And regular churchgoers live longer, a study has

revealed. Think of that, going to church adds years to your life and life to your years.

Regular churchgoers, in my opinion, seem to be more loving, more generous, more caring, more gracious, more moral, more honest, and more

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accepting of others. They are less prejudiced, more committed to family life, and more involved in working and serving out in the community to improve the quality of life for everybody, and especially for the less fortunate.

Why is that? It's because no institution in the world teaches love and compassion like the church does. Do you remember when someone asked Mother Teresa how she could find the strength to work daily with all those needy people? She answered, "Every person is Christ for me, and since there is only one Jesus, that person is the one person in the world at that moment."

Mother Teresa learned that in church. The church teaches us to see every person we meet as Christ in disguise. The church teaches us that we are not isolated Christians. We are family.

One of my favorite poems says it well.

*You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "I";*

*You cannot pray the Lord's Prayer and even once say "My";*

*Nor can you pray the Lord's Prayer and not pray for another,*

*For when you pray for daily bread you must include your brother*

*For others are included in each and every plea;*

*From the beginning to the end of it,*

*It does not once say "Me."*

**THIRD, GOING TO CHURCH CALLS US TO A RIGHT REASON FOR LIVING, TO MINISTRY, AND TO SERVE.** Isaiah, too, was given a reason for living, for ministry, and a call to serve that day long ago. There in church, he felt the tug of God. He realized that a prophet was needed for that time. And, he said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Let me ask you to picture something in your minds with me. Imagine, if you will, that you are watching the Super Bowl. The teams are introduced, and everybody stands for the national anthem. Then each team huddles up on their respective sidelines with their coaches. Suddenly, the referee blows his whistle to start the game.

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Now, what would you think if, at that moment, all of those talented football players, the starting teams for both sides, stayed on the sidelines, and the coaches ran out onto the field to play the game? Pro-Bowl standouts, superstars, and the league's best players all stay on the sidelines while the coaching staff takes the field.

The players, on their sidelines, shout encouragement to their coaches, but none of the players go out on the playing field. They expect the coaches to do it all.

If you saw that happen at the game, what would you think? You would probably think, "This is the most bizarre thing I've ever seen. Look at all those talented players standing there. Why aren't they putting on their helmets and taking the field? Why are they staying on the sidelines and watching their coaches play the game? This is crazy!"

And yet, that's the way some people relate to the church. They think the ordained pastors and staff are supposed to do it all, while they stand by and watch. But that is certainly not biblical.

Think about it. Jesus did not call a single priest or rabbi to be one of his disciples. He called laypeople to help him do his work! And he is calling you right now. He has a special job that only you can do.

Can you hear his call? And can you say with Isaiah: "Here am I. Send me!"

Going to church, supporting the church with our presence, that is so important because it draws us closer to God. It gives us compassion for others and it calls us to ministry.

Yes, going to church: it is so important because it calls us to a right relationship with God, a right respect for others, and a right reason for living. And that's why church is a great priority for our lives.

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