

“Why Church?”
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I'm so glad that you are here! And I'm so glad to be beginning yet another year here together! It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces, and also to see a few faces that are new to me. I hope that if you are looking for a church in which to make a new religious home for yourself or for your family, that you might find such a home here among us.

This morning I want to talk for a bit about why we are here. Why are we sitting together in this sanctuary instead of sitting at home in our pajamas, drinking coffee and reading the newspaper of our choice or watching TV or doing household chores or playing with our kids or taking a walk outside on this beautiful, crisp, nearly-fall morning with our dogs? You know why you are here and each one of you is here for your own reason or combination of reasons. And so I hope that you'll reflect along with me as I ask and try to answer the question, “Why church?”

There are so many reasons that we come to church. Some of them are obvious; others, perhaps less so. We come to church sometimes for comfort when we are hurting, whether the pain is personal and private, or whether it is shared with our communities. When a tragedy befalls us, when a young person in our neighborhood dies tragically or when an event like 9/11 happens, we come seeking solace. When we are in the midst of a personal crisis, having experienced the loss of someone we love, or the threat of such a loss, or an illness, we come seeking support.

We come to church sometimes for answers when we are doubting; for courage when we are afraid; for prodding when we are feeling stuck in our lives; and for direction when we are not sure which way to turn.

We come for a sense of community; to be with like-minded, like-hearted people; to feel like there is someplace in this world that we belong. We come so that we might not feel so alone, so alienated. We come seeking sanctuary in a world that can sometimes seem so heartless, so senseless. We come to trade in our sense of despair for a sense of hope.

We come to be cared for. We come to be reminded that we are part of something larger than ourselves, something important, something good. We come to learn and to be challenged. We come to figure out what it is we believe. We come to be inspired.

We come to get support in educating our children, in instilling in them our values, and in helping them to have conversations with their peers about what it is that they believe.

These are all good reasons to come to church on a beautiful Sunday morning. And if you find any or all of these needs being met at this church over the course of your time here, then you are blessed and so are we!

I grew up in a church outside of Washington, DC. It was, as many of you know, a United Methodist Church, but in many ways, it was very similar to this one. People of all religious faiths seek religious community for many of the very same reasons, despite the differences in their theologies.

For me, church was a place where I felt like I belonged from a very young age. I discovered a role early on, a way to break in, by singing in one of the junior choirs. I sang in choirs there all the way into early adulthood and I played hand bells. I got to know a lot of people fairly well.

We sang together. We had fun together. We sometimes got in trouble together. Not just the kids, but also the adults, some of whom were known for wearing ear buds and listening to football games during Saturday afternoon rehearsals. They'd pass notes through the choir loft to update the rest of us when our team would score. And the choir director would give us the look that said, no matter our age, that what she wanted to do was box our ears. Unless it was a big game or a close score, and then she'd be cheering, too.

I participated in religious education classes from a young age. I learned a lot, some of which I believed and some of which I did not. But at the time, I probably would have told you that the most important things about both choir and Sunday school were the relationships, the friendships that I was building with my peers. We went through Sunday school classes together, and later through youth fellowship.

I had the opportunity through church to develop friendships with people who did not go to my school. It was a whole new circle of friends. And I developed close relationships with some of my teachers and youth advisors and with one of the associate ministers who was heavily involved with youth programming.

There were older adults who knew me by name and said "hi" to me, and noticed when I wasn't there. They could say things like, "My! How you've grown!" And "I remember when you were just 5 years old!" And, "What a nice job you did!" and "I'm so PROUD of you!" and mean it. One of the most important things I learned in church – and I was extremely fortunate in this way – was that I was not only acceptable, but loveable, and loved. Such a blessing!

I learned about ritual in church, that there was a power in doing some of the same things together week after week, year after year. That worshiping in the same room with a group of people could sometimes be a very powerful experience, especially with the pomp and circumstance around Christmas and Easter.

And I learned to be a leader in my church. There were opportunities to perform, there were opportunities to serve as an acolyte and to be in the Christmas pageant. I was elected an officer in my youth group a couple of times, and I got to represent the group on the church administrative board. I got to go to church meetings and learn about the business of the church and the decisions facing the leaders, some of them somewhat interesting, and most of them quite mundane.

So there was community and there was comfort and challenge. There were answers aplenty when I had questions and there were people more than willing to discuss with me almost anything I wanted or needed to discuss. Some of the people were like me and others quite different. Some were friendly, others a bit temperamental. A few we tried, as kids, to avoid. All in all, I felt cared for and I learned to care for others.

But it has occurred to me since then that many of the things I got from my experience growing up in a church community were also available to me elsewhere. I mostly loved school and was a pretty decent student. I played team sports. I rode horses and started teaching horseback riding as a teenager.

There were other places in my life where I felt a sense of community, a sense of intimacy with others. There were other relationships in which I felt supported and encouraged. Even though my religious beliefs were different from many of my friends at school, we had a great deal of other things in common. I was especially close to a few of my teachers. I certainly learned a lot in school, not just about math and science and reading and writing, but also about the world and how it worked. Even a little bit about religions other than mine.

I was challenged at school and at the riding stable, and I learned to be a leader in both of those settings as well. I had friendships with people who were younger than I in summer camp and also with my older camp counselors and some of the elders around the barn. I felt cared for in those settings, as well, and I knew that people noticed and missed me when I was gone.

Truthfully, much of what I got at church, as important as church was to me, was available elsewhere, and in most ways, I don't think my unchurched friends every felt particularly deprived.

As an adult I know plenty of people, as do you, I'm sure, who don't go to church. But they are smart, often happy, well-adjusted people who have found other ways to have their needs met. Some of them have been lucky enough to develop close friendships and a strong sense of community through other groups or activities. They've found ways to give and get the support that they need.

Some of them have even found other ways of meeting their religious needs, through yoga or meditation, either with others or on their own. They've found other ways to meet their needs to serve others in their communities and many of them are very engaged in caring for others or in social justice work. Many of them, frankly, don't feel deprived or as if something essential is missing from their lives just because they don't go to church. They have found other ways to be inspired, other ways to learn and to raise their children with their values.

So, what is it that makes churches different? Or what SHOULD make them different? As Tom Owen-Towle, the author of our first reading this morning, has said,

A church is not a social club, a hospital wing, a political action center, or even a spiritual refuge, although all these disparate components are part of what a church is. Rather, healthy congregations are primarily sites for seeking and spreading the holy...

Often the word “holy” is used to describe something that is purer or better than. But etymologically, the word “holy” simply means “whole.” The wholeness, or fullness of something. And there is, or can be, a very special whole-life aspect to church. We worship together, we study and learn together, we sing together, we eat together, we serve together, we play together in a community of many ages and stages of life. And our whole lives can become interwoven with this community of others in a way seldom replicated through our experiences of school or work or social clubs. That is one very special thing about church.

But when I think of the word “holy,” I think also of that which is beyond me – beyond who we are – something toward which we aspire in some way. And so, when I think of holiness – or wholeness, for that matter – I think of the ways in which we are called to grow beyond ourselves.

When I think of all the things that church meant to me personally growing up, the two significant aspects of church that weren't duplicated somewhere else in my life were...

First, having the opportunities to learn about my religion and to grow in my beliefs; the opportunities to talk about BIG things, and ask BIG questions – about God and Life and Death and Right and Wrong - and to reflect on what I believed and what I didn't, and to grow in my faith...

And second, having opportunities to serve others in the context of my faith community and in the context of that learning I was doing about faith and belief. Through my church, and nowhere else, I had the chance to step outside of the normal boundaries of my life, to witness lives that were very different from mine, to see firsthand the abject poverty and injustice and despair with which others lived day in and day out. I had the chance to serve others in the context of studying the bible and its message to love my neighbor and to care for the poor, the oppressed, and the disinherited. I had the chance to see, to act, to reflect on what I saw, and to act yet some more.

And those experiences, more than anything else in my youth, transformed me. They made me a different person than who I had been. It was through those opportunities that I was able to make clear connections between my faith, my ethics, and my behavior. They helped me to grow as a person of faith and works. And now I could no more separate what I believe from the choices I make or how I act than I could fly without wings. I don't think I could have gotten that anywhere else in my childhood or youth or in adulthood, frankly.

Those things together helped me like nothing else to grow beyond myself. To direct my attention away from my own needs and fears, and toward the needs of others. Away from what was comfortable and toward what was right. Away from what was and toward what could be. A. Powell Davies in our second reading referred to “the love he owed to others.” “There are things I must do in the world,” he said, “unselfish things.” And church is where he went each week to be reminded of that.

When I think about what makes church – or any religious community of any faith – different from a social club, or any other type of secular organization, for that matter, what it comes down to finally, is this. Churches ask us, invite us, demand of us that we be fundamentally changed in some way. Some call it “conversion.” Some call it “being born again.” Some call it “doing God’s will.” You can call it “losing one’s sense of self or ego.” Call it “becoming one with something bigger.” We might call it “growing in accordance with our highest values” or even simply, “becoming a better person.” Basically, in whatever theological language, it seems to me that church is about encouraging and facilitating our transformation. And that is holy work.

Learning and being reminded to care for others and to carry out acts of compassion in a world and a culture which prefer that we take care of our own interests, mind our own business, and fear the other is holy work!

If your church isn’t doing that for you...if it does not challenge you to grow beyond yourself, to think more of others, to grow in your capacity for compassion and mercy, to long for healing and mercy and justice not only on your own behalf, but also on behalf of others...well then, perhaps it is no more than a social club, a support group, a continuing education center, or a political organization.

To paraphrase Tom Owen-Towle...

Church ought to be that place where we are “called out” of our daily routines for a sacred purpose. Church ought to be that place where we learn to embody our holy quest, refine our convictions and en flesh our commitments...to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly in this world.

So may it be here, in this place, for us, today and every day. Amen and Blessed be.