

Why Bother at All?

Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

Whitefish UMC

May 22, 2011

- ✦ Why do we come to church? The answers may be as varied as each one of us here and as of those of us who are absent from the congregation today. I daresay that when we were young, only a few short years ago, the answer at the top of the list would be: “because we have to.” If we were kids, many of our parents dragged us with them to church. And even if we were adults, we came because it was what was done if you were a member of polite society. Going to church on Sunday was just routine.
- ✦ But that was then and this is now. Even though belief in God remains common to most of us, those of us who come to church are now in the minority in our society, in our town.
- ✦ So what draws us here today and those other days when we can get it together to make it here by 10:15? Oh, and by the way, on June 19th, we’ll be starting at 9:15 for the summer. The other night at our meeting of church leaders, we discussed why we haven’t seen some beloved church family folks in worship for awhile. And we wondered if changing the worship time would make a difference.
- ✦ If you were to ask these absent sheep of the flock, they would say something like: “We love this church, but we’re just so busy.” Or, “Sunday is the only day we have to sleep in and have a leisurely morning.” The thing is, I get it. I, too, was once a hard-working

mother with a child who was in every activity known to harried parents as well.

- ✦ For my part, I need to be able to come to worship with fellow disciples to know that God is in charge, is not asleep at the switch despite signs everywhere that violence, warring madness, and greed seem to prevail. And so one of the reasons we come to church is to seek God's presence and be reminded that God is real and alive and with us.
- ✦ Here in the United Methodist church, we do this through what John Wesley, the founder of our denomination, called the *means of grace*. By abiding by these methods of seeking to know and grow in God's love: to do no harm, to search the scriptures and study them, to worship and pray privately and publicly, to fast and abstain from that which captures us and distracts us from God, to gather together to support each other and hold each other accountable, and to engage in acts of service and compassion.
- ✦ So I think we come to seek and find God, and to learn how to see God better, especially in the midst of troubling times.
- ✦ Another reason we come, especially I think in this congregation, is to get a sense of belonging. We all need to seek an identity as part of a community. We come to see those we love and with whom we have something in common. And we come to belong to something greater than ourselves. For somehow we know that together we mean more than we do separately, alone.
- ✦ And the truth is, we come to gain strength for the journey that is our life. People often come to church when some bump in the road occurs. When a frost heave like illness, death, loss of a job or

relationship reminds us that life without a source of strength and love is too hard to bear alone.

- ✦ Many of us come to church because we want to make a difference in the world, and we want to learn how and be part of a community that believes in an alternative vision to the world's idea of success. We come because what the world and Madison Avenue offer is not enough, feels hollow and empty.
- ✦ We come to find salvation from ourselves. For the hard truth is, it's difficult to be who we want to be, who God created us to be. When we are honest, we know we need help. We come to call upon Jesus, our Savior, to heal us, to make us whole, to forgive us. So we can forgive ourselves and each other.
- ✦ Maybe we come because we are afraid. We're fearful that this is all there is to life, and that beyond this life there is a great nothingness, a cosmic void. Perhaps we are afraid of death and of the pain of suffering. We need to know that there is purpose beyond what we know, that we have a future beyond this life, somehow. We need to know that there is meaning in our life and in our death.
- ✦ And when life is good, we come to say thank you, and to share our joy, to pass it on.
- ✦ You could add your own reasons to this list, and I hope you will. Because sometimes we come without thinking about it, by force of habit. And I believe that if we consciously and intentionally name the reasons we come to church, it will help us refine our identity as a community of faith, to make a commitment to it, to celebrate it and to share it.

- ✦ There is comfort in knowing we are not the first to ask these questions and to feel this way. As we turn to the scriptures for today, we find some surprising truths in familiar words: “Do not let your hearts be troubled—believe in God, believe also in me...in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...where I am, you will be also...I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me; if you know me, you will know the Father...the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and do even greater works than these...”
- ✦ There is so much meat in this passage that it is almost overwhelming. And it is so familiar that we almost skim over its depths. And one of the things that we often miss is that these words are spoken to the disciples by Jesus in what is known as his farewell discourse, his last words and instructions to his friends before he dies. And the disciples don’t get it. They want more proof, more assurance, more specifics.
- ✦ But Jesus is clear: look to my life, my ministry, and even to my death and resurrection. There, he says, is the proof you need. And the disciples still don’t get it, denying Jesus, scattering after his death, and needing the transformation of resurrection to finally have faith and make a commitment.
- ✦ And we learn in the scripture from Acts, the story of the first martyr of the faith, Stephen, that real commitment and living as Jesus lived led to the same result that it did for Jesus: a violent death.
- ✦ In the early church, the stories of the martyrs of the faith—of Stephen, of Paul, of Peter, of Perpetua and Felicitas, inspired many converts to Christianity. No so for us. Today when we think of martyrs, we think of crazy fanatics strapping explosives to themselves and bombing

enemies of the faith, of suicide destroyers, of desperate and unstable people.

- ✦ And yet the story of Stephen teaches us a lot about faith and commitment and why we really bother being a part of a church.
- ✦ Wait a minute, we say—I'm not willing to be stoned to death for Jesus. This kind of commitment gives us tremendous difficulties. For the likes of us, if we were to sing our hymns honestly, this is how we would reword them (as one humour site on the internet suggests):

I Surrender Some (All)

Fill My Spoon (Cup), Lord

Oh, How I Like Jesus

I Love to Talk About Telling the Story

Take My Life and Let Me Be

Onward Christian Reserves

Where He Leads Me, I Will Consider Following

Just as I Pretend to Be

When the Saints Go Sneaking In

- ✦ But what would we be willing to die for? For our children, for our spouse, for our country, for????? What will you name?
- ✦ What would it take to make you willing to die for Jesus, for our church?
- ✦ But maybe that's the wrong question. Perhaps a better question is: what are you willing to live for? Are you willing to live for Jesus, for our church?
- ✦ What did Stephen see that Thomas and Phillip and the other disciples could not? Stephen saw the Father at the moment of his own death, filled with the Holy Spirit, he saw the glory of God. Stephen sees the glory of God because he has followed the One who is the way to the Father. He

has followed him on the way that leads to a death like his, a death that for him promises life, when he becomes like his Lord. He has followed on the way that reveals the truth, even when the crowd denies it and covers their ears.

- ✦ Stephen didn't set out to be stoned. He was the first deacon. He ministered to those in need. It was in seeking life, in bearing witness to the love of God, that he knew the truth of Christ, and so, in knowing and seeing him, he came to know and see God.
- ✦ No one wants to be a martyr. But a martyrdom of sorts, a chance to witness, of God reaching out to love us, waits for each of us if we follow in the way.
- ✦ This week I read in the *Christian Century* about the beatification of three Catholic priests from the German city of Lubeck, who were beheaded in quick succession, along with a Lutheran pastor, for resisting the Nazi regime. The comingled blood of these Roman and Lutheran clergy spawned an unheard of ecumenical spirit in their city that still lasts.
- ✦ After they each were arrested following the bombing of their city by the British, they were sentenced to death. Rather than fear their executions, the four were said to have died as happy martyrs, confident that they were going to be with God. "Who can oppress one who dies?" one priest wrote to his family.
- ✦ Contrast these clergy, who lived as best they could as Jesus lived, with those who have promoted the end of the world rapture that should have occurred yesterday. Is there not a difference in living each day as if it could be your last, and following the living Christ as best you can each day, than in placing your energy in scaring the heck out of folks?

- ✦ Do you remember the film *Places in the Heart*? It is set in the south during the Depression. Everything is scarce. Life is hard. The movie opens with a church service. There's good gospel singing going on. It looks like any other ordinary church, any other ordinary day. But that same day, life turns upside down for many of those sitting in the pews.
- ✦ In between the opening and the closing of the movie, we see the best and the worst of humanity. A young black man, who accidentally shoots a white man is dragged to death behind a car; we see a couple in which an affair pushes forgiveness beyond the breaking point. The Great Depression forces a young widow and her two children to live in the same house with a black migrant worker and a blind man to eke out a living in the cotton fields. Though they have nothing in common, they learn to work together and the house that they share out of dire necessity turns into a home.
- ✦ As it began, so the movie ends back in church. There, in the final scene, all the characters—good and bad—martyred and just plain stupid—have come home around the Lord's Table. We all need the grace of Jesus to get home and to follow in his way.
- ✦ Although we're not told just how, the closing scene in the church, at which all present are singing together the old gospel song: *Blessed Assurance*, offers the answers to why we come. I had never heard that hymn until I saw the film, and I remember coming to church and asking Dorothy Harper, the wife of our pastor and a good southern woman, if she knew it.
- ✦ All I could remember was the refrain: "This is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long...." And I wanted to live that refrain,

and I still do. So why do we come to church? To get help to live the blessed assurance that Jesus offers us.

- ✦ We come for forgiveness, because we need each other, because we need Jesus. We come to hear the old old stories of Jesus and his love. We come to know hope and to grow into who we want to be, who God created us to be. We come for salvation from ourselves and from sin and death. We come because we want to know the way, the truth, and the life. We come because we want to come home. And because we can't do it alone—because life is often hard, and also full of joy, and we want to share it.
- ✦ Are you willing to live for Jesus, to be so filled with the Spirit that you will be even greater love in his name?
- ✦ Jonathan Kozol, in his book *Ordinary Resurrections*, tells this story: “A man sitting beside me in a church service at a storefront on Brook Avenue (in Brooklyn, NY) once said to me, “You’re not from the neighborhood.” When I said no, he shook my hand and said I should feel welcome. “If you were lookin’ to get you some church, you came to the right place.” I never forgot that phrase, Kozol said, “get you some church”—because it sounded like good food that you were being offered and could count on if you really wanted to be filled.”
- ✦ We can make our church that kind of good food you can count on if you really want to be filled with the Spirit. Stephen shows us the way, if we use Christ as our compass to follow in life and death:
 - To act as a servant leader, working diligently for the welfare of others.
 - To speak boldly about our faith and to tell the story of God’s loving embrace of the human race.

- To look serenely to God's kingdom, especially when the world is roaring with rage.
 - To trust our Lord to hold us close, in even the most desperate situations.
 - To try to offer forgiveness to those who hurt us, as Jesus did on the cross.
- ✦ We don't have to die to become the kind of church we would die for. But we do have to live our faith, hold fast to our convictions, whether people cheer or crucify us. And we have to look beyond the limitation of today toward God's reign of love and justice for all who seek God. That's what grows the church. That's why people will come.
- ✦ We are an Easter people. This is our story, this is our song—praising our Savior, all the day long. May we welcome all home to this house, to Jesus' church. For where he is, we may be, living in God's abundant love, also.
- ✦ May it be so. Amen.

Source: The Christian Century, May 17, 2011.