

6-9-24

All Because I Went to Church

Acts 16: 13 - 15

I want you to understand something extremely important about your being at church this morning – about your attendance at this worship service conducted by FCC where you and your friends and your neighbors have the opportunity to actively participate in worshipping God - and maybe you realize this already – but I'm going to remind you anyway:

You're not here by accident. Even more importantly, you're not here solely for yourself or just for your own spiritual welfare.

(I can almost hear some of the husbands and children murmuring under their breath right now: You got that right, my wife or my mother made me attend!)

Truth be told, we're here at church today as much if not more for the sake of others as for ourselves. And this includes God. (Not that God is ever needy of our presence, but He desires it for our sake because He Loves us.)

But, as far as others are concerned, our accessibility and our availability to God on Sunday morning is crucially important because as we come together to pray, to sing hymns and worship choruses and to read His word, we learn how to engage with and relate to God, who in turn, teaches us how to relate to one another. More than this, He empowers us and moves us into ministry for the sake of one another both inside and outside the church.

It's no stretch of the imagination then, to say that the world we live in and operate in is a better place because we go to church.

Now some of you might be a little surprised at me saying this. After all, you think to yourself, don't most people who avoid church like the plague view church as an antiquated institution that has lost its meaning and power and relevance in contemporary society?

How is my church attendance ever going to help people like that?

Well, I think it helps in at least one way: When non-church goers see you and me attending worship service, their conscience cannot help but be stirred or pricked. I'm reminded of what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians: *"We are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other the fragrance of life."*

Now, I grew up on a dairy farm, so I had plenty of chances to smell the difference between life and death. The fragrance of my mom's lilac bushes that blossomed just south of the house every summer? To me that was like breathing in life itself. The rendering works truck stopping by to pick up a dead cow or pig? Not so much.

When others witness our allegiance and devotion to Christ – and this can happen in all sorts of ways – maybe we pause to give thanks before a meal or put a "closed" sign in our business window on Sunday or refuse to engage in water-cooler gossip or offer assistance to someone who's struggling financially or emotionally or spiritually - All these things can be ways to express our allegiance to God.

But people will sense one of two things when they witness our devotion: life or death. If they have a right relationship with God, seeing others devoted to God will give them hope and encouragement and joy. But those who have rejected God and who have never known God, they smell death – their own death.

Now, I'm not trying to be morbid here. It's just that they'll know, at least on a subconscious level, that they remain under God's judgment and have yet to have their name written in the Book of Life. It'll probably manifest itself as a gnawing at one's soul, an unsettled feeling that simply won't go away.

When we do things to honor God and serve Him, and others witness them, awareness of one's spiritual need is suddenly heightened. What laid dormant for weeks, months or even years can be abruptly awakened by another's act of religious devotion.

Now, this doesn't mean that we should engage in these activities just for the sake of trying to prove a point to the neighbors. If we do, we'll just be viewed as self-righteous kooks or fanatics who enjoy watching other people squirm. But if, in the course of daily living, we're prompted by God's Spirit to acknowledge Him, we should, by all means, do it.

Here's an example: I always chuckle to myself when a parishioner finds it necessary to tell me why he or she didn't attend church on a given Sunday. To be honest, I don't need to know. I appreciate them telling me, but really, I don't need to know.

I understand that we all have reasonable and legitimate excuses for our absences. But usually they'll say something like, "We had out of town guests."

Okay, that's cool, but I often wonder to myself ... How is it that our out-of-town guests hold so much sway over our devotional lives? What are we afraid of? That we're going to somehow offend them if we still go to church in the morning while they still happen to be sleeping in! Spare me!

I've got a better idea. Instead of tiptoeing around your friend's weekend hedonistic lifestyle, invite them to go to church with you! After all, if they're comfortable enough to hang out with you for a couple of days, they shouldn't be all that offended by your offer to take them to church. What's the worst thing that could happen? They might have to meet the pastor?

We Christians need to stop apologizing for everything and thinking that we're always offending someone! We're not the cause of strife and turmoil in society. Rejection of the Gospel is! In fact, we Christians are out to make life better and typically we do!

For example, if it weren't for Christianity, there would hardly be any institutions of higher learning. Many of our prestigious universities were founded by Christian leaders and for a long time they supplied American pulpits with God-fearing pastors not to mention doctors, teachers, lawyers and engineers.

Obviously, the Christian influence in these halls of higher learning has severely waned over the past decades, much to the demise of this country, and many universities have severed ties with the Christian church that helped them get established, but there is no denying history, no matter how much people want to change it.

The same holds true for hospitals, libraries, and our courtrooms of law. All these institutions that we cherish and look to for comfort and guidance, especially in trying times such as the ones we're living in right now, have been established by communities of faith who had the vision and foresight to make them reality.

But wait a minute, you protest. Weren't these institutions established by the government? I suppose indirectly, and in some manner, but on what foundation was our government established?

No one with an ounce of integrity can deny the answer: Our form of government was established on the premise that our rights and responsibilities as human beings find their source in and are ordained by the Judeo- Christian God of the Bible in whom we place our trust!

This is what makes our nation so unique and so great – that it was established by the providence of God so that His name might be glorified through the devotion of his people, and in doing so, all mankind might see the Light and come to the Light – the Light being none other than Christ Jesus our Lord.

This, I think, is one of the reasons why our country seems to be in such turmoil right now. People are becoming more and more aware of the fact that we, as a country, are not living up to the standards of our birthright – what God has called us to be and to do.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that this country and its institutions are inherently evil as some are in the habit of saying. I'm actually saying the opposite!

There's an upheaval and civil unrest in society right now because we, as a nation have strayed from the God-ordained standards that are inherent in the DNA of this country and have been there from the moment of its inception.

In other words, people are protesting for the wrong reason! Protestors are protesting because they think they're the victims, when in reality it's God and His standards for humanity that are being assaulted and victimized!

Think about it for a moment. Why did God give us the Ten commandments? The same Ten Commandments that at one time was prominently displayed on every courthouse in America. (Maybe they are still. I don't know. I don't make it a habit to visit many courthouses.)

But did he give them to the Israelites so that He could be a killjoy and an angry despot and have something to hold over us and make us squirm? Hardly!

He gave them to us so that we would learn how to properly relate to Him as our Creator and Savior and how to relate to one another so that we could live long, and have fruitful, joyful lives!

Here's what God says in Leviticus 26 after Moses has shared the law with the Israelites: *"If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees of the field its fruit. Your threshing will continue until grape harvest and the grape harvest will continue until planting, and you will eat all the food you want and live in safety in your land."*

Abundance, prosperity, and safety! For God? No, for us! And this is just the tip of the iceberg!

But what if we don't obey God's words and refuse to follow His ways? Well, the future looks eerily like the present. God's judgement will continue to be upon us: *"I will bring you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain your life."*(Lev 26:16) And this too is just the beginning.

I respect a person's first amendment right to protest, but you'd better be directing your protest toward the right thing.

Don't misdirect your demonstration.

Don't transfer your guilt onto someone else.

If you haven't followed God's commandments and are not experiencing God's blessings, own it, confess it, and get right with Him. This is the only way we can find peace in a world that sometimes seems to be unraveling at its seams.

I think this is a big problem with society right now – lots of misdirected anger and hostility.

We're unwilling to tend our own garden. It's too hard of work. It's easier to play the victim and destroy our neighbor's garden.

This is why going to church is so important. When we attend church, we're proclaiming that God's not dead.

That He has a word for us and wants to communicate with us.

That He loves us and that he has demonstrated this truth in the most powerful and tangible way, by sending his only begotten son to die for us and make a way for us to be forgiven and restored and filled with hope and power and love.

And in Acts 16, we read that Paul, Silas and Timothy went to church. Obviously, at this point in history it wasn't called church, and it wasn't even on a Sunday, but for all intents and purposes, it was church.

Luke described it as "*a place of prayer.*" It was outdoors and outside the city gate, next to a river, presumably because there were not enough Jewish folks in this Roman outpost of Philippi to support a synagogue.

On his missionary journeys, Paul made it a habit to visit the synagogues simply because he believed that it was there where he would find a receptive audience for the Gospel.

Philippi proved to be no exception. Here, he met Lydia, who was in the textile trade and a worshipper of God. Things went so well on his initial visit, (Lydia and her household all became Christians) that Paul returned regularly to this "*place of prayer.*"

Now doesn't this place of prayer sound relaxing and peaceful, a place one could go to be uplifted, encouraged, and strengthened in the Lord?

Isn't this what we hope church will be for us? And many times, it is, but getting there can be a challenge, because we're in a spiritual battle.

And the enemy isn't happy when we make a conscious and deliberate effort to be with other believers, to worship Him and proclaim His holy name.

And this is where it gets interesting for Paul as well.

On one particular occasion, when Paul and his companions were *"going to the place of prayer"* - Once, when they were going to church, they met a slave girl who was demon- possessed.

Now typically, when we think of a demon-possessed person, we usually figure that they'll have a difficult time functioning in society, but in this case, we'd be wrong.

In fact, this girl functioned so well, Luke describes her as someone who *"earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling."* He also records that the girl followed Paul and his associates around for a number of days and kept shouting things that were in fact, true: *"These men are servants of the Most- High God, who are telling you the way to be saved."*

Let this be a lesson to us: The devil likes nothing more than to influence and use highly functioning people to carry out his schemes!

The more popular and celebrated a person is, the more influence they wield, at least from a worldly perspective, and if they're not walking with the Lord, they become prime candidates to do the enemy's evil work either willingly or unwittingly. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is that we, as Christians, need to be aware of this situation and respond with power of Christ, maybe not in the exact way Paul did, but definitely with the reliance on God's name and Holy Spirit:

“In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.’ At that moment, the spirit left her.”

All this happened because Paul and his friends went to church.

And I wish I could say that this girl became a devoted Christian and followed the Lord for the rest of her life. I don't know. It's quite possible, but I do know this:

When we choose to make God a priority in our life, and choose to follow God whole-heartedly, and remain open to God's leading – and that means not letting the world side-track us from the things that are important, like meeting with other believers to encourage and support one another in both good times and bad, guess what ... God will use us in unimaginable ways – and we may not even be aware of it.

Look what happened to Paul. He ministered to that girl, and look at the doors that it opened up - not to say all of them were fun or a piece of cake.

A riot started, the crowd attacked, he and his companions were beaten and severely flogged and thrown into jail – all because he confronted that slave girl on his way to church – code word for living for God.

And amazingly, when he was in jail with his “accomplices”, under serious duress, after all that he'd been through, he still decided to ***have church!***

Most of us would have thought, and I know what I would have done – Hey, let's keep our mouths shut so we don't tick anyone else off. But what did they do? They prayed and sang hymns to God. They had church.

And look what happened: God did miracles among them.

An earthquake freed them.

A jailor and his family came to Christ.

Maybe some of the prisoners did as well.

All because Paul sought out a place of prayer - that's where it started.

With all the questions swirling around in our lives. We're wondering, when will things get back to normal?

But maybe normal isn't any good, if normal means playing hooky from church.

If normal means foregoing Christian fellowship in favor of the ballgame.

If normal means skipping our prayers.

If normal means not speaking up for Jesus and our faith.

So, let's not forget to go to church, not just for ourselves and our families, but for those we'll meet along the way.

They don't even know it, but they're counting on us as well - to go to church - in whatever way we can - to honor and serve and love our Savior.

Now, "to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy - to the only god our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."

Jude 24 - 25