

Why Are We Here?

28 May 2006

Bible passage: **Romans 12:1** (The Message and TEV)

“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life,— and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.” (TEV—“This is the true worship that you should offer.”)

Sermon nugget: The purpose of worship/church is to inspire us to experience God’s presence and to help others know that presence.

Message Part 1

It’s race Sunday in Indianapolis, and that means that a number of our “regulars,” and some of our team members aren’t here this morning. That’s because some of them live in the direction of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, and they simply can’t get here this morning, mostly because of the traffic congestion. And anyway, it’s Memorial Day weekend, and some have left town for a few days away. So, today, we know a lot of the reasons that some aren’t here.

But why does anyone come to church anytime? What is it that prompts us to get up on Sunday mornings and show up for a time with God? Why are we here today, or any Sunday?

I suspect the answer to that question is as varied as the number of folks who are here today. In my younger days, it was just simply habit—or so I thought. I was one of those strange folks who actually got up on Sundays when I was in college and went to church! There were a lot of reasons, I guess, as I look back, and part of it was that was just simply what people do on Sundays.

You and I know that isn’t the case today. There are more folks *not* attending church than going these days. In fact, in the Indianapolis area, that amounts to more than ½ of our population, and some even estimate that to be closer to 70% of those in our area who do not attend church. There are more folks at home or on the golf course or at the race than we’ll see in all the churches in the Indianapolis metropolitan area combined today!

If we ask the reasons, we may hear something similar to a story I once heard. It was about a mother who was waking her son to go to church. He said, “I don’t want to get up to go to church. It’s dull, boring, and irrelevant! Give me one good reason I should go to church.” His mother answered quickly, “Because you’re the pastor.”

I’m sure that the reason some folks don’t continue to go to church. If they do give it a try, is that it often comes across as “dull, boring and irrelevant.” Some have trouble seeing that spending an hour or so on Sunday morning at church makes any difference at all.

Frankly, many think that church has nothing to do with us, and nothing to offer us, and all too often, they’re right.

Our title this morning is “Why are we here?” By that, we’re not trying to find out why we’re here at The Garden, but rather to ask ourselves what the purpose of gathering together as the church, in this form or any other, actually is. What is the church supposed to be? Why do we get together to “worship?” That’s what we want to explore a bit this morning.

In her book *Grace*, Mary Cartledgehayes, who is a United Methodist clergywoman, talks about the various friends who explained to her why they went to church in the days when she didn’t and couldn’t find a reason to. The conversations she talks about spanned a six month period of time, and appeared to be rather serendipitous.

For instance, one friend mentioned quite casually that she went to church, and Cartledgehayes asked her why. The friend explained that for a while, she and her roommate were so poor that they couldn’t afford to buy food, yet they’d sometimes come home to find sacks of groceries outside their door. They never found out who brought the groceries, but the food kept them alive, as did the knowledge that someone was caring for them. She wrote, “Somehow for my friend, God got wrapped up in the groceries, and that’s why she went to church.”

Another friend had two adolescent daughters who taxed her almost beyond measure, and yet she always seemed to remain positive and upbeat. Cartledgehayes asked her how, and she responded that she dragged her girls to church every time the doors opened. “Does that help?” she asked the mother. Her response: “I don’t know, but I have to do something, and it’s the only thing I know.”

There are many different reasons that people give for taking some time each week to focus on God. For some, it’s a time to get re-centered and re-focused. For others, it’s an attempt to find answers to questions or dilemmas. Many find comfort and a sense of peace in that time, and yet others find a little something to give them hope and encouragement.

When I think about why we go to worship, or to church, I’m thinking there are multiple reasons that are all intertwined. Some of them are those I just mentioned, but there are others. For some of us, there may be a sense of emptiness, and we’re hoping that we can experience something that will fill us up give us new energy.

Some of us are looking for guidelines, for a way to live our lives that might be better than what we’re currently experiencing. Some of us hope to experience that power that is greater than our own to give us the courage we so need to get through our days. Let’s just think for a moment why we got up today and came here. Why am I here today? Why are you?

In describing the purpose of this “church,” The Garden, we say that our mission or goal is “to engage all in the quest to know and share the unconditional love of God.” What do we mean by that? We mean several things. We begin by saying, “engage all,” and for us, that means to engage our spirits on a level that’s a bit deeper than saying or singing things together, which is what happens in a lot of places.

Engagement is more than participation, and it goes to the depths of our being—sort of spirit-to-spirit, or soul-to-soul. What we hope is that which is the real me and the real you have a positive encounter and experience with one another, and in that encounter, experience God. I don’t know if that makes sense or not, but it’s the best way I know to try to explain what I mean.

And we say, “to engage all.” By that we mean that everyone is welcome here. There are no hard and fast rules we have to follow, and no hoops that we must jump through before entering these doors. The doors really are wide open for those of all faith traditions, or none, for those from all walks of life, for those who know what they believe, and for those who don’t have a clue, but may have some curiosity. All of us are here.

We say, “to engage all in the *quest*.” We use the word “quest” because, for me, faith, like life, is a journey. Most of us don’t have all the answers to either faith or life, and we’re searching. That’s OK, and in fact that’s what I think it’s all about. I can tell you one thing for sure—that’s certainly what it has been for me. My faith is far different today than it was 10, 20, even 30 years ago (, and I suspect it was be much different 10, 20, or if I live long enough, even 30 years from now! We grow and change in life and in faith.

Video: Raymond

Message part 2

I suppose there are many reasons, including Raymond’s, that we choose to go to church, but I want to press us a little further. What are we searching for and wanting to experience when we go to church? At The Garden, we make an assumption as to why we come here; we say that we want “to know and share the unconditional love of God.” There are really two parts to that. One part has to do with each of us experiencing God’s loving presence as a real and powerful force in our own lives, and the conviction that God is with us—here on Sundays, and every moment of every day.

The second part is about sharing that love with others. Author and pastor Brian McLaren, in his book *A New Kind of Christian*, puts it like this: “The church exists to equip its members for the benefit of the world.” And Daniel Poling said it quite directly with these words: “The

place of the church is not to change society, but to change men and women who will then do the changing of society.”

When we are changed by God’s love, we live and act differently, and we then make change waves wherever we go, some radical waves and some small ripples, but we can’t experience God’s love and keep it to ourselves. It makes a difference in us, and sharing that love in the way we live our lives touches others, and makes a difference for them.

That’s basically what our Bible passage is saying. The writer is Paul, and he’s dictating his letter to the people in the church in Rome. He’s talking about worship, and he says this: “So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you. Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going to work, and walking around life, -- and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for God.” (TEV—“This is the true worship that you should offer.”) The way I understand that passage is that the best way for us to worship God is with our very lives, with everything we say and everything we do. And sometimes, we come here each week to get back on track and start over living our lives fully embracing God’s love.

At least, that’s why I think I’m here. What about you?

CLOSING:

I have always really enjoyed anything Anne Lamott has written. In the first book of hers I ever read, *Traveling Mercies*, she explains why she made her son go to church. She says, “The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by.” She continues by explaining the most of the people who have what she wants, which she names as purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, and joy, are people with a deep sense of spirituality. I like that, and frankly, that’s why I’m here.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.