

“Embodying A Better Way”
August 1, 2021

Morning!

If you have a Bible we’ll be in **Matthew 16:13-18, Hebrews 10:19-25**

We have a few catchphrases we use consistently to kinda narrate who we are, what we do, and what we’re about as a church. One of these is “Following Jesus Together.” We are learning to be with and become like Jesus alongside each other. Another one is “the things you do, do things to you.”

We believe that growing in being with Jesus and being more like Jesus is a community project, and that the things we choose to do play a significant role in it. So we place a huge value on your formation. We love you, we want Jesus for you, and so we shape things and teach things in such a way that you know what’s going on in the world, and how that’s shaping you, and how Jesus comes to change us.

And the truth is, in fear of sounding too dramatic, our world has changed significantly in the last year and a half. With Covid, people’s perceptions have changed on a large scale when it comes to all sorts of things: Do I go to the movies or just stream this at home? Should I work remotely or go to the office? What are travel protocols if I want to go to this place? How am I doing with my mental health? Should I buy a Peloton? And perhaps one of the most noticeable questions from our view of things that people are asking is - how should I spend my Sunday morning?

In a nation-wide study on the impact of church attendance over the last year and a half, on average, attendance has dropped some 60%. In another study, 34% of church attenders said they’ve church hopped (whether digitally or physically) and 32% said they’ve just stopped attending anything. Now that number is wild to think about: 32%. So 1 out of every 3 just stopped showing up.

Now I hear those stats and I think a couple of things. For one, I think for the next year or so we’ll continue to notice other ways in which covid completely shifted our culture. And two, I think a big reason why that significant number just stopped is because many people don’t know “The Why.” Why do we do this? Why do we show up? What’s the point? And when that happens, I think we miss out on all the beauty and goodness of what God is doing and can do with His people when they show up to gather together.

In fact one of the primary tools we use to help us as a church make sure we’re helping you grow is through what’s called our Covenant Practices - seven things that we believe are crucial for

your spiritual health and vitality. And if you're a member of our church we all mutually agree that this is something we want to adhere to, as in, we give each other permission to call us out if we're off. One of those practices is weekly gathering with us on Sundays.

And between you and me, drawing the curtain back a bit, before covid happened we were already a little concerned that we may not necessarily be prioritizing Gathering weekly.

And so as we hit the tail end of the summer, and we're slowly easing into "normal life", we wanted to take a few weeks to talk about this. Why coming together is so crucial in your formation - Not just what we do when we show up. But why do we do this together.

Today, I want to answer the question: Why do we gather and why does it matter?

If you are anything like me, especially if you grew up in church like I did, that might be a question you never even thought to ask. It can feel like, "Umm... that's just what we do. It's just what I've always done." Which is not a great answer. Because when that's the case, and none of us were doing it for a year, of course it's why 30% decide it's no longer what they do. And to be clear, our heart for you always is we want Jesus for you above all else. And the last thing we want is for you to just mindlessly go through the motions. We don't want to be those sort of people, rather, we want to be people committing ourselves to things Jesus calls us to so we can experience all He has in store for us.

So when it comes to gathering, why do we do it?

To answer that, we're going to be jumping around a bit this morning, but let's start in **Matthew 16**.

Quick context: We're a few years into Jesus' ministry at this point in Matthew. He's been working miracles, teaching on the kingdom of heaven. And everyone's thinking "Just who is this guy?". And in verse 13, we pick up into a conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples. He knows people are talking about him. So he asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

They respond, "some are saying you're John the Baptist, some are saying Elijah, and others are saying you're Jeremiah or one of the prophets". Basically, everyone knows you're some kind of prophet... they're just trying to figure out which one. And Jesus responds, "**But, who do you** say that I am?" And Peter, in what is probably his best moment as a disciple just kind of blurts out, "You're the Christ" - which was the greek way of calling him the Messiah, or the King of God's kingdom - "you're the Christ, the son of the living God."

It's a very big moment for Peter... followed by a very bad moment for Peter that we won't get into, but what I want to draw your attention to is how Jesus responds. Verse 17.

Matthew 16:17-18

And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

This is the first mention in the New Testament of the church. It's the first time the word shows up and it's used by Jesus and communicates some pretty important things about the church's identity.

First, there's the word itself - ekklessia. It means "assembly" "gathering" or most literally "called out ones." This is actually why we call what we do on Sundays, "The Gathering". It's not to sound weird or cultish, but to carry over this idea. **"Gathered" is who we are.**

Peter confessed that Jesus is the Christ and Jesus says on this truth I will build my "called out ones" my "gathered ones" my "assembly".

Now obviously, there are a lot of ways that we do this and other things we see in Scripture that make the church the church. Family relationships being another big one that we harp on... it's not just that we are a group of people who meet together in various places, but we are group of people whose lives are interwoven together as family through Christ. And, part of **being a family is gathering.**

But, secondly, it's a gathering built on something... **"You are the Christ."** Now to be clear, Christ was not Jesus' last name, but a title. Christ is the Greek of the Hebrew word Ma-she-ahk - or Messiah. And the Messiah, or the Christ, was in the Jewish mind the long-awaited King of Israel. The one who would take the throne, wipe out their enemies, and usher in the kingdom.

Now, keep that picture in mind and let me take you to a text that might be pretty familiar to you that makes this point in another way...

Hebrews 10:19-21

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, **20** by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God

There's a lot happening here for sure and I won't spend time unpacking all of it. But, In the Old Testament, God's people, the Israelites, were served by priests. Priests were set apart by the people as mediators, or go-betweens, between God and men. The priest would go into the temple and offer sacrifices on behalf of the people.

Once a year the Israelites had a day called Yom Kippur, or "the Day of Atonement." On it, the priest would sacrifice an animal and do specific things with it's blood as he "atoned" or paid for the sins of God's people.

So to help us connect the dots, here's what the author of Hebrews is saying. That in this radical twist, no one saw coming, **Jesus the Christ, the long awaited King is also both the great high priest and the true and perfect sacrifice.**

Except his exaltation, His power made manifest, is not a throne or a palace, it's on a cross. Jesus the Christ wipes out His enemies not through some military force, but through His death. Jesus Christ the King is also Jesus Christ the perfect priest and sacrifice. And because of the blood of Jesus, shed for sin, we can now enter into the presence of God with confidence.

And so the first thing I want you to see from this passage is that if you are Christian, this is your truest reality. **What Christ has done for you is your truest reality.** You have confidence to enter into the presence of God because of what Christ has done on the cross. Period. Game over. End of discussion.

And that changes everything.

Hebrews 10:22-23

let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.

Because of Jesus, you now can draw close to God with confidence - "full assurance" as the author writes knowing that the sin that previously stood between you and God has been washed clean. Your record of guilt, your shame, the things you've done, the things you've had done to you... your latest failure, your latest foolishness... none of that prohibits God's love and acceptance of you any longer.

And in many ways, what the author is doing here is reminding his audience of the very same thing Jesus said to the disciples - *this* is the rock that the church is built on.

And here's why that's an important nugget to draw out before we go any further: **we now get to embody this new reality into us.** We get to, through the Spirit, not just embrace the Truth of Jesus but the Way of Jesus. We get to inhabit this new reality. This new way of living.

And we've said this in various ways in the past, but the truth is, we are wired to live our lives according to what we believe to be the truest reality of ourselves.

- A kid that's never told that they're loved or liked by their parents will grow up to be someone who doesn't feel worthy of love from anyone, always carrying around them this feeling of condemnation and shame
- Someone who grew up having a hard time making friends will grow up believing they're not worthy of acceptance and that others just tolerate them but don't really like them
- I heard recently about a woman that had grown up in a very legalistic church culture, you have to do this for God to love you, and even years and years later, removed from that church, she still talks about herself only as broken and busted up, not recognizing the healing and grace God has given. That's the story that she's living into.

And like we say all the time, the things we do do things to us... and that includes what we tell ourselves and surround ourselves with.

Those other realities shape us. They affect the things we think - how we think about ourselves, what's most important in the world, what's valuable and worth chasing, how we think about others and the world around us... what we say about ourselves shapes who we become and what we do.

Which is why the writer of Hebrews encourages us to, "hold fast to our confession of hope." Hold fast! Hold fast to God's reality! Because it affects the way that we live! And why he goes on to what he says next...

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Now I want you to notice something there real quick. The author of Hebrews just made some huge theological claims. The God of the Universe has made a way for you to enter into the very presence of God. He's dealt with your sin that has banished you from Him for so long by sending His Son Jesus to die in your place. And then he conquered death. Therefore, verses 24 and 25. **Gather together.** The first command he tells them in light of all of this: gather together.

Because something happens when the stuff you know in your head is actually practiced out with other people. It reinforces it. I was reading a book recently about biblical epistemology, basically, “How do you know what you know?” And the author said the primary way people in the Scriptures learned anything was through ritual. Corporate practices. It wasn’t enough to just learn information. It had to be ritualized to get it to really sink in. So a couple illustrations. Think of it like playing guitar, you don’t just study where your hands go to make a D chord, you ritualize it, you involve your whole body into it. And over time, after going through it over and over again, eventually your knowledge of guitar has transformed into something else. You can play the chord now because you’ve embodied it. Or, a similar illustration that I feel silly to talk about. I’ve been getting into golf, very weird I know. But what I’m learning to appreciate is that for the most part it all just boils down to one motion. The golf swing. That’s it. And there’s all these different moving parts that the pastors have been patiently coaching me up on for years at this point. And at a certain point you just swing over and over and over until something clicks and you finally get it. That knowledge is now engrained itself into your body.

That’s what the author is getting at here. If you really want to know the God of the Scriptures loves you and has made a way for you, and you can go to Him anytime you want, the way you really get that to sink deep down within you, into your body, is through physically gathering with God’s people on the reg.

So when it comes to this “holding fast” we need encouragement from others face-to-face. When we feel shame or guilt, we need to be spurred on by others physically, to be stirred up to love and good works. To essentially be reminded of the new reality we now live in as God’s “called out ones”. And the way the writer of Hebrews says we do that here, in my opinion, just sticks out like crazy: How do we stir each other? How do we encourage God’s story in our lives? By meeting together. By gathering with God’s people

Gathering isn’t something we do simply because it’s who we are... but because it does something to us.

Notice in v.25 - “and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” “The Day” refers to our future destination - that one day Jesus will return and do away with sin and death once and for all. That one day Jesus will reunite body and soul, that all of those who have died and trusted in Jesus as King will be resurrected. And one day, we will be worshipping King Jesus with a multitude of people from all over the world, from all over time in our physical, resurrected bodies. One day we will be like the high priests, entering into the tabernacle. Although this time it will be face to face, free from sin, forever and ever.

And until then, because of what's in store for us, **we gather weekly to rehearse our eternities together. We gather to embody a better way in a world that so desperately needs it.** We remind ourselves of who we are and where we're going so that everything we do here in this hour to an hour and a half together is meant to reinforce this reality.

And I will say, one thing I love about our church is how we do community. LifeGroups. Doing life together. It's beautiful and we wouldn't have it any other way. And I think in our minds we put more value on being together throughout the week than we do gathering together once a week. But we want both. Both are crucial for you. If being the people of God is our very identity, then both of these work together - how we gather impacts doing life together.

And while one hour a week pales in comparison to the 167 other hours you spend out there, we can remind one another through our physical presence to reinforce this so much where we get to live this out throughout the week.

- In a world that says “This is all there is. Out with the old, and in with the new.” When **we physically gather** together each week we step into this ancient tradition that followers of Jesus have been doing for the last 2,000 years from all over the globe. We remind ourselves of the reality that our ultimate allegiance is not to a country, it's not a faction, it's not to a set of ideals, our allegiance is to King Jesus.
- This is why we **welcome** one another here. From the moment you pull up to the parking lot to when you get in your seat - you're greeted by half a dozen people. Some say we're too friendly. We'll take it. But man, **in a world of exploitation and manipulation and dehumanization** - where it always feels like someone wants something from you. To buy something from you. To take something from you. Where everyone has their own agenda. When we gather together each week, you're welcomed by the family of God who's just excited to see you. No hidden agendas. No selfish motive underneath. Here, people smile and make eye contact with you, because you're part of this. And isn't that refreshing? Isn't that so good for your soul? And when we show up here, greeting one another, we help to restore people's humanity, to embody this spirit of love and inclusion. It's absolutely beautiful.
- This is why we gather together to **sing**. In a world of grabbing headlines and click-bait that says the world is falling apart, that people are polarized, that things are worse off than they ever were, we refuse the un-reality that says we must live as angry and bitter human beings. And when we sing we get to embody that we're united over and above anything else. And something happens to you, when you engage in singing with your body. When you actually use your vocal chords with other people around you. Even if you don't feel it, even if you feel embarrassed or that you're singing off-key, something is happening to you. You're telling yourself, “This is the truest reality. This is what I want to be true of me. So Lord, help me know this deep down right now. Because I feel bitter

towards people. I feel angry and hurt, maybe by people even in this room right now, but I refuse to accept that. I am united with these people in Christ, so I will sing until my throat is sore.”

- This is why we gather together to hear **God’s word**. In a world of **distraction and endless entertainment**, our physical presence communicates that we’re all focusing as a people to hear and see God’s Word being taught alongside others who you may or may not know - because we’re a people that Jesus is redeeming together. (And if we’re a little boring from time to time, that’s ok - that becomes a training opportunity to grow your attention span so that you might be more present and focused and attune to conversations with other people. And if you wanna grow in charity and empathy and encouragement for others, maybe you wanna throw in an Amen from time to time or laugh at a joke that’s not all that funny - I’m speaking for the other guys obvi...)
 - And this is just a quick aside, as thankful as I am for technology, and that I was able to zoom with people for almost a year when me and our family felt so lonely at times, it is a fear of mine that I might “settle” with digital interaction rather than face-to-face relationships. Or that I might get so caught up on the latest Netflix show rather than hanging out with someone I’m trying to build with because I’ve grown so used to it over the last year.
- This is why we gather together **to serve** on another. In a world of **consumerism**, where life is meant to all revolve around me, where the dominant question we’re told to ask ourselves every moment, “What do you wanna do to make your life better?” When we physically show up to volunteer our time on Sundays, we’re embodying a better way to ask, “How can I make someone else’s life better?” We’re getting into our bodies the message that God’s people matter. God’s mission matters.
 - So I’m gonna wake up earlier than most people on a weekend and help with the **parking team** and I’m gonna fish out some signs in a hot and humid warehouse and set up signs and wave people in with a smile on my face because I want people to feel welcomed into the family of God. I want them to know that them showing up on a Sunday was the best decision they could have made for their souls.
 - Or. I’m gonna set my alarm to wake up **ON A WEEKEND** and serve with the **kids ministry**. I’m gonna pour my life into these young kids who are mostly just screaming and crying because I want them to know Jesus. So I’m gonna love them and pray for them and repeat myself a lot because life is not about me. I’m gonna volunteer my time and energy away so that parents can get freed up to spend an hour of undistracted time just being with God’s people.

And when we do this we slowly begin to step into all that God has for us. We slowly over time, by simply showing up, engaged, expectant, we allow the Spirit to work in us and through us - expecting God to show up in our midst that we might receive His presence afresh.

There was a recent article in the NY Times called “There’s a Certain Kind of Joy We’ve Been Missing” by a psychologist who talks about this idea called **collective effervescence**. It’s this feeling of happiness and joy you feel when you’re synchronized with others, doing something together, engaged with your body, doing the same thing. Our bodies and our mental health long for this sort of thing. And there’s a line he says in the article that, “Peak happiness lies mostly in collective activity.” In other words, happiness and joy are a social project. The more people come together, to show up, regularly, the more joy is in store for them. The more they choose the group over themselves, to engage in something together, the more happiness oftentimes awaits them. It’s like we keep discovering new ways to prove God’s been right all along :)

And that’s something you just can’t receive when you tune into a podcast, or stream online, or sleep in and stay at home or go for a hike in the woods. Now that stuff is fine from time to time, we have the sermon podcast for a reason. But let’s let that be the exception not the norm. Because there’s something wired deep within you, that God’s created, for you to long for this sort of collective physical activity we have here.

I see this with my kids right now. They’re at the age where they love showing up on Sundays. Big smiles on their faces. They love seeing their friends. They love recognizing adults and doing a full-sprint hug head first into them, usually without them knowing until it’s too late. (I’m sure if you stick around in the auditorium or the lobby you’ll see it happen.) But there’s this giddiness our kids have to know they get to see their aunts and uncles in our church family.

Now I’m not saying we start full-sprint hugging into people unexpectedly. I think that’d be frowned upon. But what I am saying is, how beautiful and good this is. What we have here. God’s presence made manifest. Each week we have a little **family reunion**. Brothers and sisters who you’re gonna spend an eternity with forever with Jesus. Each week we get to join with a couple hundred people worshipping Jesus. Sometimes I love to stop singing just so I can hear you all - to be enveloped by all those voices singing. I mean, that is the Spirit at work. It’s one of the best things for my soul to hear you all do that each week. And the truth is, Heaven’s gonna be like that one day. But better. All of us gathered together.

And in the meantime, the more we do this together, the more Jesus is preparing us for that Day. The more we embrace this reality, the more trained up we are for Heaven. The more we embody this better way, the more ready we are for the life to come.

So until then, let’s not miss out on what God’s offering us here each and every week.

Prayer

Father, thank you for this gift you've given us here - to be called out ones living out what it means to be in your kingdom.

Jesus, thank you that through your blood you have made us family together, that through you, you have made a way for us to have direct access to the Father.

And Spirit, we ask for you to come down afresh to flood our hearts again. That the more we step into obedience, the more life we can get into us. Work in us to love what we have here. If any of us are living in un-reality, either by being in conflict with someone here or choosing comfort or whatever over gathering, convict us with your grace, and lead us to repentance because in you there is life forever and ever.

Amen.