

"No More Church"  
Revelation 21:22

May 26, 2019

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

Why bother going to church? This is not a question you are used to hearing your pastor ask, I'm sure. Isn't the pastor supposed to be asking the question, "Why not go to church more often?"? But it's a question I believe many people, even Christians, are asking. On any given Sunday, more than half of the members on the rolls of any given church (including Peace Lutheran Church) choose not to attend church. They have, for whatever reason, not bothered go to church.

There are always reasons why people don't go to church. Sometimes, people say, the weather is too bad to be able to get to church so they stay home. On other occasions, people will say, the weather is too nice to stay cooped up inside of the building on a Sunday morning so they leave home to do other things. People get busy with other activities. There are family activities, sports activities, and leisure activities. Indeed, why bother going to church when there are so many other things to do?

Then we read our text for today where John continues to tell us what he sees in heaven. Only this time he tells us what he does not see. John said, "And I saw no temple (i.e. church) in the city." Now, if there's no church in heaven and there's so many more fun things to do here on earth than going to church, why bother going at all? What difference does it make whether you are here or not? Or, has a vast majority of people figured out something that the rest of us simply refuse to admit – that church is not all that important?

Stop and think why you do go to church. Many of the faithful seem to come to church simply out of habit. Now that's not necessarily a bad thing. Habits can be good. However, simply doing anything out of habit may not be necessarily good either.

Many may attend church as if it were some sort of religious meeting which we are obligated to attend in order to have our Christian card punched by God. We come into the sanctuary as if it were some sort of meeting hall. We chat and visit with each other as we do when we are waiting for any meeting to begin. We pull out our "agendas" (bulletins) to see what the business of the day will be. An appropriate time during the service, we "sign in" so that our attendance is duly noted. Since it is only a meeting, we do not feel all that bad about missing, especially if we have something more enjoyable to do. We certainly don't feel guilty about not being there since the business will be taken care of by the other attenders.

Some people seem to attend church as if it were a show. Some churches have begun building their places of worship to look like a theater than a church. They have theater style seats with cupholders on the side for your Starbucks coffee that is sold in the lobby (I mean, the narthex). What goes on in a place like that is evaluated like any other movie or show. Was it entertaining? Did it make me feel good? Was it interesting? As a result, if the preacher is boring, the choir a little bit off, or the hymns too hard to sing, many conclude that it's not worth coming to. After all, who intentionally goes to a bad movie?

Still other people come to church because they are “guilted” into doing so by a family member or friend. When we were in Wisconsin and I was serving a deaf congregation full time, the members attempted to invite their friends to come to church. Their selling point seem to be that it wasn’t all that bad to go to church and it only lasted for an hour. To me, it sounded like trying to sell a trip to the dentist – something that’s good for you, even though painful, which could be endured if you had to because it didn’t last that long.

None of these really presents a compelling reason for coming to church. Habits may be helpful or not. In our busy world today, who needs or wants another meeting to attend? As far as entertainment value goes, church may be entertaining on Christmas and Easter, but overall, it’s not a very entertaining venture, compared with secular entertainment. As far as “guilting” people into coming to church goes (or, for that matter any, type of behavior), it may produce a temporary change in behavior, but often doesn’t produce any lasting benefits or behaviors.

If church is nothing but a tradition done out of habit, a religious meeting which fulfills an obligation to God, a source of spiritual entertainment, or something that you know you really should be doing, why bother going to church? Let’s put a sign on the church door that says, “No Church”, and join the other people out camping, golfing, sleeping in, or having fun on these beautiful Sunday mornings in the summer.

But there are good, compelling, and beneficial reasons for going to church. The first has to do with WHERE come together – this place. Some people will say, “I don’t have to go to church. I can experience God in nature.” Or, “I can read the Bible and praying at home.” What is special about this place? This place here is not a meeting hall or a theater of any kind. This is a special place. It is called a “sanctuary”, a word which literally means a “holy place.” What makes it holy? It’s not as if this property is morally superior to any other property. Going back to the original meaning of “holy” which is “separated from”, this area and all of its furnishings have been set apart for divine purposes. This place – and all other places like it – are holy.

This place is where the Lord has specifically promised to be present. Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” (Matthew 18:20) He is present here in a special way to give us something better and more dependable than simply an experience or a feeling. Gene Edward Veith writes in his book, “Authentic Christianity”, “God has not promised to be present on the golf course. God has made no vow to meet you in the radiant beauty of the sunrise or the stillness of the evening sunset. God never claimed that He would be present by means of some inner feeling in your gut. Rather, God has promised to be present in the Word and Sacrament ministry of the church.” (p.77) A promise from God is much more reliable and beneficial than any feeling or experience we might have.

This affects our behavior. Remember Moses’ experience with the Lord at the burning bush. That didn’t occur in some ornate building, but on the side of an ordinary mountain. But God was present and said to Moses, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” It was holy because God was present. Therefore, Moses bowed his head in fear.

Knowing God is uniquely present here and that this is “holy ground” guides us in our behavior. This is why we treat this place reverently and with awe. What goes on in here is not a meeting or a show but an encounter with God Himself to uniquely meet a universal need of all humanity. That is why we enter this place quietly and reverently. This is why we bow as we approach His altar. We are about to meet God who is coming to us in a most intimate way and deal with our most important problem.

That problem is not material in nature – lack of entertainment, financial difficulties, or health issues. That problem is not psychological in nature – lack of self-esteem, broken interpersonal relationships, and so on. These may be problems, but none of them is the most serious problem of them all: sin. Sin is different than all other problems in the world. Sin is a problem we all have. We know that by experience and by God’s declaration, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” Sin is a problem that kills everyone infected with it. We hear from the Word of God, “the wages of sin is death.”

However, God Himself has promised to personally deal with this problem in this specific place. But you may say, “I don’t see God when I come into church. How can I encounter Him here?” Some people would reject the notion that we encounter God in church or, if we do, we blame Him for not being more obvious in our encounter of Him. The problem is not that God isn’t here. The problem is that we have deserted Him through our sin. We have separated ourselves from a closer encounter with God by consistently doing what He forbids and by regularly failing to do what He commands.

As sinful human beings, we are unable to have a direct encounter with a holy God. Such an encounter would kill us immediately. Moses once asked God for such an encounter. He said to the Lord, “Show me your glory.” The Lord answered him by saying, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” (Ex. 33:20) The same would happen to us now if we were ever in the direct presence of a holy God.

Therefore, all our encounters with God are mediated. That means we encounter God indirectly through other things. It’s like a person who has had skin cancer can encounter the sun only with long sleeves covering her arms, long pants covering her legs, and a hat covering her head. Direct exposure to the sunlight could be fatal so the skin must always be covered in the presence of the sun.

In the same way, exposure to the holiness of God would be fatal for us. So, there must always be a buffer between God and humanity when He chooses to reveal Himself to people. In the Old Testament temple, the people would encounter God through priests who would go to God on their behalf, bringing animal sacrifices for the forgiveness of their sins. God would come to the people through the priest, granting forgiveness for sins in view of these sacrifices. While the people did encounter God, they never experienced Him directly.

The same thing is true today in His Church. People encounter God indirectly through pastors, ordinary men He has called to speak on His behalf. God speaks through them, using their voices to declare His love and forgiveness for them to check. God comes to people indirectly through Sacraments which use ordinary means – water, bread, and wine – to create new life and to grant forgiveness and peace. We encounter God here, but we never experience Him directly.

But that is all going to change in heaven. St. John sees no temple in the new Jerusalem because there will be no need for one. There will be no need for us to receive that which the Church has been established to provide. There will be no need for baptism to create new spiritual life because death, both physical and spiritual, will have passed away. There will be no need for forgiveness to be pronounced or preached about because sin and every evil will be gone. There will be no need for us to receive the Lord's Supper for the assurance and hope because there will no longer be any doubt about God's love for us as our hope becomes reality in heaven.

But that's only part of it. St. John goes on to say, "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple." It's not simply that the services of a temple or church are no longer needed. It's that our relationship with God will be different than it is here. Because there will be no sin, there will be no more separation between God and humanity. No longer will there be a buffer between God and us. No longer will our encounter with God be mediated through other things. Rather, we will be in direct contact with God. There will be no more doubt over God's presence. There will be no more feelings of loneliness and separation. We will see Jesus face-to-face and live with the Lamb, Jesus Christ, for all eternity.

Until that time, the Church here on earth is very important. According to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Commandment, it is not an optional activity for Christians. However, this is a commandment much like when your mother says, "Eat your vegetables." She does that out of love so that you may receive the necessary nutrition you need to remain healthy and alive.

God commands us to gather together to hear His Word and to receive His Sacraments so that we might receive the necessary spiritual nutrition we need to remain spiritually healthy and alive. God knows that, as long as we remain sinful human beings, we need the new life, the forgiveness of sins, and the strength & support which He desires us to have. The Church is crucial for mediating the way between a holy God and sinful human beings that we might have these gifts.

So, attend church faithfully, not just to maintain a habit, fulfill your religious duty, or to do God a favor by being here. Be here because you need what God gives here: life, forgiveness of sin, and eternal salvation. These are things which you cannot do without and which are given to you in a special way right here. God's Word is given to you here for your instruction and comfort. Jesus' body and blood are given here for you to eat and drink for the forgiveness of sins. The support and encouragement of other Christians (a topic for another sermon) is found here.

Someone once said about attendance at church, "For the faithful, no excuse will ever be sufficient. For the unfaithful any excuse will do." It is not that the faithful are somehow better people or the unfaithful are somehow worse sinners. Rather, the faithful see their sin, feel their need for forgiveness, and will let nothing stop them from encountering God and receiving His gifts here in church. May God grant us the ability to see our need, desire God's gifts to meet that need, and let nothing prevent us from encountering God and receiving His gifts here in church until there is no church in heaven. Amen.