

WHY I ATTEND WORSHIP

I Corinthians 14: 26-32, 40; Hebrews 12: 1,2

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I have long wished I had the insight to know why some people are faithful in their church attendance while others fall away; to understand why in the 1950s churches were full to bursting and in the 1770s they were almost empty.

God knows everything has been tried as an inducement.

In the mid 1800's the newly appointed rector of a parish about 8 miles outside of Oxford was disturbed to find that very few of the villagers attended worship. He consulted with the church clerk who suggested that it might encourage the people if the rector gave them a sixpence each Sunday. So he did. And attendance improved rapidly... for a while... but then the numbers began to fall off. Again the Vicar consulted with the clerk: "Well sir," said the clerk, "it is like this: they tells me as how they finds they can't do it for the money." - P.H. Ditchfield, The Parish Clerk, pg. 293.

The Rev. William Grimshaw, minister at Haworth in Yorkshire, many years before the Rev. Patrick Bronte lived there, tried coercive methods. During the singing of the opening Psalm he would go out into the churchyard with a horsewhip and compel the laggards to come in. Some Sundays he would dash across the street to the pub. A visitor once passing the public house on a Sunday morning was startled to see people jumping out of ground floor windows. At first he thought the pub must be on fire but later he was told that the patrons had seen the parson coming. In Rev. Grimshaw's defense I must mention that during the years of his leadership attendance increased from 12 to 1,200. - Thomas Hinde, A Field Guide to the English Country Parson, pg. 49.

Good preaching, fine music, quality time set aside for prayer, lay participation.... These things seem to have an effect on worship attendance but not enough to allow anyone to predict how another will respond. I don't know what brings people to worship but what I do know is why I attend and, this morning I want to share with you my reasons which have nothing to do with inducement or coercion or anything I've mentioned thus far.

I attend worship because this is a Meetinghouse and this is where I meet God.

You know and I know God is everywhere. God *can* be found on the golf course but I have noted that those who choose to play golf instead of attending worship seldom become God's bosom buddies or devoted servants.

God may be everywhere, but God through God's son Jesus, promised that if we will join with two or three or 93 others - in their name - they will meet us here.

And - for me - that is what happens. Most often God and I meet just after I've stopped paying attention.

There are preachers who believe you must pay attention. The great Spurgeon was bothered when the people of his congregation turned their heads to catch a glimpse of latecomers. He said to his people: "Now, friends, as you are so very interested in knowing who has just come in, and as it disturbs me to have you turn around, I will henceforth describe each person as he/she comes down the aisle, so you don't have to turn around and I can have your full attention." Only once did Spurgeon get to describe a late arrival, what she was wearing, how her health appeared to be that day. After that no one turned around because no one came late

There are preachers who believe you must pay attention but I say "Dream on!"

One of the great things about worship is that it is safe time in a safe space. Few of us can daydream at work. We shouldn't daydream while we're driving. My wife does not like it if she's speaking and I'm not listening carefully. But in church you get to decide where you put your focus. You get to decide whether the sermon or the stained glass is most interesting. I most often meet God once I start to wander, to think about something I just heard, to reflect upon a Line I have just sung.

William Morris, the great English designer who gave us such as the Morris Chair, once shared that he met God in Canterbury Cathedral, and it changed his life. He had stopped listening to what the priest was saying and had begun to notice that everything in that cathedral was hand made. The pulpit was hand carved. The candles were hand-dipped. A brief conversation with God reminded him he too was hand made - he was personally made by the hand of God. In a flash of insight as brilliant as what Paul experienced on the road to Damascus, William Morris knew that what was pouring out of post-industrial revolution factories could never compete with what came from the craftsman's workshop and he devoted his life to promoting craftsmanship. - Ronald Blythe, The Circling Year, pg. 199

I come to worship for this is a meeting house and it is here that I meet God.

And there is a second reason for my persistence in attending worship. Worship is where I meet my brother and my sister. My brother lives in Andover, MA and my sister in Methuen, MA. I'm the only one in the family who wandered west of Worcester. Obviously they are not here but there are people here who I would love to call my brother and my sister. For basic decency, open honesty, hearts full of acceptance, multi-faceted interests, you can't beat church people. I have read all those lampoons that suggest that church people are narrow but that has not been my experience. The narrow, the selfish, the egocentric, the materialistic, the sadistic... these find other things to do on a Sunday morning. Those who come are some of God's finest creatures and I want to be with them.

When Harry Golden was young, he asked his father, "If you don't believe in God, why do you go to the synagogue so regularly?" His father answered, "Jews go to synagogue for all sorts of reasons. My friend Garfinkle goes to talk with God, I go to talk with Garfinkle." - Harold S. Kushner, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, pg 122.

Worship people are special people. That's a maxim I've not seen fail.

But there's a second meaning to my witness that I come to church to meet my brother and my sister.

A Rabbi asked his students "How can you tell when the night is over?" The students made many suggestions. "Is it when the rooster crows?" Is it when the sun comes up over the horizon?" To each suggestion the Rabbi said, "No." "Then how can you tell?" They asked their teacher. "Night is over," he told them when you can look on the face of any woman or man and see that he or she is your sister or brother. If you cannot do that it is still night." - Benjamin Andrews, NH Conference newsletter 1985.

Worship is a special place for me because it is here that I see everyone as a brother and a sister. It is here that prejudice learns to die and family grows.

And I want to be at worship because this is where I meet my parents. My mother died in 1983, my Dad in 1985. I plan to talk about my Mom on Mother's Day but let me tell you a little about my father now. When dad was 8 his father died. He left school to work in the woollen mills. His mother and two younger siblings needed the money he could earn. As a young man one of his fun pursuits was going to Christian Endeavor and it was there he met my mother. It was at Christian Endeavor that my Dad learned he loved to sing and by the time I came along he was leading the hymn sings at the church. Hymn sings in that church were a lot like stretching exercises because they took place between the hour we sat in worship and the hour we would sit in Sunday School. All ages went to both. Do you remember the hymn, "Follow the Gleam?" Well my Dad would divide the hall and one side would stand up, sing the first line of the refrain, and sit down; the other side would stand up, sing the second, and sit down...

Follow...
Follow the gleam
Banners unfurled...
O'er all the world....

It was glorious! Had there been a boat departing for the mission field at that moment I would have been on it. And it was my dad up there leading it all...

The wages my Dad got for working in the woollen mills were asthma and emphysema. Just before he died I called him to talk and he was having great difficulty with every breath. I said that I was going to fly back to Massachusetts to be with him. He said, "No, stay with the rest of your family there's nothing you can do."

"That's it!" I said, "I feel so helpless, There's nothing I can do."
"Well", he said, "you could pray you know."

And we did , over the phone , and somehow my Dad and praying and singing gets all mixed up every time I come to worship. It is here that I meet my folks.

One of the oddities of the Middle Ages was that towns were forbidden to build a church or dedicate it unless it had in it some bones of the saints. Consider for a moment the bones that are here. Those

who have worshiped here the past 120 years. Those who inspired them to build. Those that we have brought with us because their faith and their example are mixed together in our hearts.

I come to worship to meet with all sorts of people. And I think that was God's idea all along. When we get to heaven... as all of God's children will... when we get to heaven, the first question God will ask us is "Where are the others?"

Or as John Greenleaf Whittier once wrote:

He findeth not who seeks his own;
The soul is lost that's saved alone.
- "The Meeting"