



The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 24, 2014

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Psalm 122

WHY CHURCH?—

TO TEACH YOUR CHURCH



The Lord's Supper, the proclamation of the Word, the joy of believers gathering together, the encouragement that one believer brings to another who is struggling—what do these all have in common? They all can be found here, at church on a Sunday morning. So often when we talk about going to church or when we talk about

the worship service, we boil it down to something that a believer does because that's what I need—I need to be in God's Word. That's true. It's as true as anything that we've said so far in this series called "Why Church?" But we've already talked about the personal benefit that you have when you make God and his Word a part of your life. Remember, you teach yourself so that you can teach others.

But today, I'd like you to look at church, at a congregation, as something different, something you don't do just for yourself, but something you do for the person sitting next to you, or in front of you, or behind you, or across the aisle from you. When you come to church on a Sunday morning for worship, or on a Wednesday night for a Bible Study, or on a Saturday afternoon for a work day, you certainly benefit from those things. You hear God's Word and you get an opportunity to exercise your faith by producing fruit. But for a moment consider why the writer to the Hebrews says in our second lesson: *Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

You see, when you come to church you get a lot out of it personally, but have you ever considered what you give to others just by being here? The writer to the Hebrews doesn't mention anything about personal growth of faith, or being in God's Word, or anything

about the Sacraments. He simply says meet together so that you can encourage. That's why church—to encourage.

You will find the very same theme in Psalm 122 which David wrote for believing Jews who were coming to Jerusalem to celebrate a religious festival. Psalm 122 is called *A Song of the Ascents*. We can't be completely certain what that term means, but it seems very likely that these Psalms were used by Jews who were coming to Jerusalem to worship, to celebrate a major festival the Passover or the Great Day of Atonement. You could just picture a group of 20 Jews, perhaps two families who met together on the road just outside of the great city on a hill, as they descend the Mt. of Olives, yes the same road that Jesus himself walked along many times, and those families meet together and shout out in song, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!' Our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem."

Jerusalem was the worship center for the Jews. It was the place where the Ark of the Covenant lay to rest on Mt. Zion, the hill on which Solomon eventually built the great Temple as the worship center for Jews. It was the place where the priests made sacrifices and pronounced forgiveness of sins to the people. It was the place where you could smell the fragrance of meat smoking on the altar, perhaps a fellowship offering where you gave a portion to God, a portion to the priests to eat, and a portion to eat yourselves as you all dined together at one table rejoicing in the fellowship that you all had, made possible because God promised to send a Savior from sin who would make us one with their God. "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD!'"

But sadly, how long was it before that Temple lay empty, without even priests to make sacrifices, let alone people to enjoy them and hear the words of forgiveness? How long before those roads leading up to Jerusalem sat unused and overgrown because people stopped coming? Instead of seeing the blessings of

gathering together as fellow believers, people saw a burden that God laid on them in his religious demands.

Is this not a picture of our own hearts? We look at the blessings of Old Testament worship life and we see our own blessings. We see churches filled to the brim with ears that need to hear those wonderful words of forgiveness, "As a called and ordained servant of Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." We see altars surrounded by like-minded Christians who have gathered together to hear those words after partaking of their Lord's body and blood, "You are at peace with God." We see baptismal fonts surrounded by baby after baby who is washed clean and made a dear child of God through baptism. When we put church in those terms it's easy to speak those wonderful words of David in our Psalm, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'"

But sadly, how long is it before that church lies empty? How long is it before communion takes only a moment with just a few tables to get through? How long is it before a baptism becomes a rare occurrence rather than a regular practice? And so often as we fail to make God's house a priority for ourselves it becomes a burden for others to go. It becomes an easy excuse to say, "My parents don't go, so why should I go? My neighbors don't go, so why should I go? I haven't gone in 6 months, so why should I go?" Those are the exact opposite of the words of David, "I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" Instead we are lamenting, "I'm content with those who said to me, 'The house of the Lord just isn't that important.'" Where has our encouragement gone that the writer to the Hebrews has told us about when we gather together?

Yet as many times as we have failed to remember those wonderful blessings waiting for us at the House of the Lord, so many times have those words been waiting for us to embrace, "Peace be within you." You see, that's the real beauty of church. This is the place we go to see so clearly God's love for us in Christ. Whether we have experienced that peace in church one time in the last year or one hundred times in the last year, those words of forgiveness never grow old and stale. "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Those are the words spoken directly to you by your loving God, and you hear them when you gather together here in this place around this Word of forgiveness.

That's right, you see them in so many different ways

when you come to church. You hear your pastor speak God's Word to you in the confession and absolution and in the sermon. You hear each other praise God together for his forgiveness in Christ in the hymns and the psalms that you sing. You hear your God speak forgiveness to you in the lessons that are read. You are reminded of that forgiveness when you lay eyes on the cross and think about his sacrifice which ensures you of all of these blessings made yours because of him. Why church?—because this is where we gather together around God's Word to enjoy all of those blessings that he gave to us.

Church is all about God's forgiveness for the sinner. You hear about it in the lessons. You learn about it in the Bible Studies. You are motivated by it in the sermons. You sing about it in the hymns. You taste it in the Lord's Supper. You are reminded of it at a baptism. You celebrate it with each other in every activity we hold as a congregation. Here at church we gather together to celebrate the forgiveness we have in Christ and we celebrate it together in everything we do. And that's how we encourage each other. Just by being here you

encourage those who come as they gather together around the Word of God, around the gospel and the sacraments, around the means of grace, the things God uses to give his grace freely to you. We do that as a church. And we get to see it together at every gathering that we have.

"I rejoiced with those who said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the LORD.'" Those were marvelous words for any Jew

marching up to Jerusalem to worship together the God who forgives. And here we are, 3000 years later, proclaiming those same words that are no less true for us. We march up to our Jerusalem to worship together the God who forgives. And so we too rejoice with those who say to us, "Let us go to the house of the LORD." Amen.

