

July 30, 2017 • 8th Sunday after Pentecost

“10 Reasons to be in Church”

Sermon by the Rev. Patricia Farris



Romans 8:26-28, 35-39

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The title of this sermon is “The Top 10 Reasons to be in Church.” Let me confess up front: I don’t know the top 10 reasons. I suppose that if I’d googled it, I would have found a variety of lists offered by experts and pastors and others. You know....there are lists of 10 reasons to follow a gluten-free diet, 10 reasons to read to your child every day, 10 reasons to drive an electric vehicle, 10 reasons to walk more and sit less. David Letterman came up with a top 10 list every night for 33 years! So I’m pretty sure there are lists out there of the top 10 reasons to be in church.

But I didn’t look for somebody else’s list and here’s why not. First, “reasons,” often hide more than they reveal. Here’s what I mean. I read an article earlier this month in the Washington Post, a pretty reputable source. The headline caught my eye: “A Healthy Mystery over attending houses of worship.” Seems that yet another study had just been released verifying that church attendance is good for your health. Researchers from Vanderbilt University found a correlation between religious service attendance, lower stress, and longevity.

Great, you’re thinking. Surely that should be on the top 10 list of reasons to be in church. Good health! I bet I could get our Health Ministry Council to weigh in on that!

The problem is, this “reason” may not be as clear as it seems. The researchers agreed on the conclusion, but didn’t have any consensus about WHY it’s true. There are a whole variety of explanations as to why it might be that people who attend worship services are healthier. They say it might be because the music and prayer and stained glass lower your blood pressure. Or it might be because of the stimulation of fellowship. Or for some, just getting out of the house. It might be because it offers parents a few moments of peace and quiet when the kids go off to Sunday School. It might be because worship leads into opportunities to volunteer and be of service. It might be because your mind is stimulated by Scripture and the sermon.

Or maybe, some say, it’s because people who go to church are people who already lead healthier and more active lives than the general population. Or, conversely, one researcher quipped that just maybe it’s the coffee and cookies.

So, our one potentially top 10 reason for going to church—being healthier than those who don’t—unpeels like an onion. As one prominent researcher in the field noted: “To say ‘church attendance is good for your health’ [says] everything and nothing at the same time. The question is: ‘what exactly is going on here?’” Or as the headline called it: “a healthy mystery over attending houses of worship.”

Now if our one top 10 reason for being in church is that complicated and inconclusive, we are already “in the weeds” as a colleague of mine likes to say. Imagine how confused we might become if we were to examine 9 more of these so-called “top reasons.”

It’s enough to make you stay in bed on Sunday morning!

And that gets closer to my real reason for avoiding top 10 lists. Somebody else’s list of the top 10 reasons for being in church might not be your list at all. And until you’re clear about your own list—your list of 10 reasons or just 5 reasons or actually just one really good reason for being in church, a reason that feels like life or death to you—it won’t make any kind of difference in your life at all.

You need, I need, we each need to be clear about our own list.

So let me prime the pump a bit to help you think about yours.

I recently read a powerful piece in the Los Angeles Review of Books by a woman screen writer here in Los Angeles. It’s her attempt to spell out, for herself, I think, as well as for her readers, her reasons for why she, a Catholic of sorts, goes to church every Sunday and drags her 5-year-old daughter along with her.

She describes her “always on” life as screen writer: “constantly feeling that you should be meeting people, impressing people, shocking people (just the right amount) is a strange way to live your life. And one of the reasons that I go to church is that church is the opposite of that. I do not impress anyone at church...I am not special at church, and this is the point. Because (according to the ridiculous, generous, imperfectly applied rules of my religion) we are all equally beloved

children of God. We are all exactly the same amount of special. The things that I feel proud of can't help me here, and the things that I feel embarrassed by are beside the point."

She continues: "It is not comforting to know quite as much as I do about how weaselly and weak-willed I am when it comes to being as generous as Jesus demands. Thanks to church, I have a much stronger sense of the sort of person I would like to be, and I am forced to confront all the ways in which I fail, daily. Nothing promotes self-awareness like turning down an opportunity to bring children to visit their incarcerated parents. Or avoiding shifts at the food bank. Or calculating just how much I will put in the collection basket. Thanks to church, I have looked deeply into my own heart and found it to be of merely small-to-medium size. "

She adds: "it is comforting to pray. Even without full knowledge or understanding of how the prayer will be received, it is comforting to offer up one's wishes for the world. In a time of stress and anxiety and distrust, it is comforting to be direct about what a possible alternative would look like...When I think about any of these [issues] outside of church, my blood pressure skyrockets and I go into a mild panic attack. When I pray about them in church, I feel like I am doing a tiny bit to help."

These are the reasons for being in church as offered by one fellow pilgrim who is, as her title suggests "Half-full of Grace. Her reasons may or may not be similar to your reasons. The point is—you need to know what your reasons are. My hunch is that many of us are probably clearer on our investment guidelines, our dietary priorities, our wardrobe preferences...than we are on our list of reasons for being in church. I invite you to work on it, and write it down. Let me say that I don't think there's a priority of "should" for our lists. There are all kinds of very good reasons to be in church. Might be the comfort of silence and a few moments of quiet and feeling closer to God. Might be the grounding that comes through personal prayer and through praying together. Might be the joy and harmony that comes from hearing beautiful sacred music and joining our voices together in song. Might be the assurance that comes from knowing that our kids are being rooted in faith values through Sunday School and youth group. Might be the fulfillment and humility that comes through giving back to others. Might be the strength that's found in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Might be the fellowship and supportive community that's there for us in good times and the very worst of times. Might be the memory of our favorite grandmother who was in church very single week and a deep desire to know for ourselves the strength she found there. Might be that sense of connection that's found sharing coffee and cookies after worship.

Might be any of these or some of these or something else all together. What is it for you? What is your top reason for being in church?

Paul's letter to some of the early Christians in the church in Rome offers a couple really powerful reasons to consider. From the verses in Chapter 8 we heard Bill read to us earlier, we hear two of Paul's reasons. One is about prayer. He wrote to those struggling pilgrims: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words..."

What a reason to be in church! When we don't know how or what to pray, we get still, and breathe, and remember that God's Spirit intercedes for us, intervenes, acts as our go-between with God, puts the words in our mouths and hearts, and we are not alone. Help is as close as a breath away.

Another reason Paul gives---worship reminds us, lest ever we forget, of the awesome strength and power of our faith that especially in this crazy world can seem, sometimes, like a distant dream. Oh no, Paul insists: "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

We need to be reminded, regularly, that we are part of something big and beautiful and strong and just and enduring for forever. And church does that.

So I invite us, church, in this church season called Ordinary Time, to set aside some time and make our own list of reasons for being in here. What is it that feeds your soul? What is it that helps you be as honest as you can about your own life? What is it that stirs your heart and opens the door to a much bigger and deeper and healthier-in-every-way life? What gets you here? What keeps you here?

Not sure? Remember this: Jesus promises that in God's house are to be found many mansions, many rooms, many resting places. A place for each of us. A place for each of our needs and longings. A place for each of our hurts and hopes and dreams. 'Seek,' he said, 'and you shall find. Knock and the door will be opened.'

To God ever be praise and glory. AMEN

Notes:

Yonat Shimron. "A healthy mystery over attending houses of worship." The Washington Post, July 7, 2017.

Dorothy Fortenberry. "Half-Full of Grace." Los Angeles Review of Books. June 8, 2017.

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