

Sermon for June 13, 2010
The Rev. Marguerite C. Alley

Have you ever stopped and asked yourself “why do I go to church”? The answers are probably many. They may range from, “I don’t know” to “I have always gone” to “My parents make me” to “I like the fellowship” to “it makes me feel good” and probably many others. Last week at school I asked my students what I thought was a reasonable question about something that they would see on their exam. I got blank stares. I told the “Sunday when you are at church you better that God inspires to you to remember the answer!” One of them said “But Ms. Alley, we don’t go to church in the summer. Mt mom says that’s vacation time!” I told them I hoped God wouldn’t feel the same way and take a vacation from church!

I expect that a few of us come to church for a reason we may not be able to put our finger on and articulate. I suspect for many of us, the reason is that we feel there is something missing in our life and we hope to find it at church.

You know, when we are young, everything is exciting and new. We live for the future. “When I grow up” is our mantra. We look forward to going in the big potty, then to going to school. We look forward to being in middle school then to being a teenager. We look forward to turning 16 then to turning our ring as a junior. We look forward to graduating from Drivers Ed and then to graduating from high school. We dream about starting college, and about starting a new job or a family. And now, here we are. We have done all those things. What do we look forward to now? Are you looking forward to turning 30 or 40 or 50? Probably not. Do we look forward to watching our children head out the door? If we are lucky! But probably with mixed emotion. Do we look forward to paying their tuition or wedding costs? I doubt it. Do we just stop dreaming about the future or do we find something else to look forward to? When I retire I will....When the house is paid off.... Or do we acknowledge that perhaps that something that we felt was missing is still eluding us and find ourselves sitting here Sunday after Sunday hoping that “that minister will finally say something that makes sense to me”. Well, you can always hope!

You may not know or believe this but there are some Sundays when I don’t want to be here. There are some Sundays when I am tired and discouraged by the events of my week and I could easily justify staying home and sleeping in. There are some Sundays when friends invite me to go out to breakfast or out on their boat and I have to say no, but I would rather be with them. There are some Sundays when I plop down in my seat and with my arms metaphorically folded across my chest and my bottom lip stuck out, I say to God “I’m here. I hope you’re happy”. But deep within myself, as I struggle on those mornings, there is this “thing”, this unseen force that draws me here. Call it God’s voice, call it the Holy Spirit; call it habit a sense of obligation if you want. But it is there and it usually wins.

So why do we come here week after week? Do we come here and sing, pray, listen to the word of God, hear sermons intended to illuminate that word and then eat a meal together in order to get somewhere with God? I imagine that Jezebel thought her plan was the simplest and fastest way to get what she and Ahab wanted...prime farm land. Only after they carry out their plan do they realize their mistake...and spend the rest of their lives regretting it. This next part requires a bit of a history lesson. The early Christian church in Jerusalem believed that one had to be a good Jew before they could be a Christian. So if you were a Gentile, you had to convert to Judaism before you could convert to Christianity. To be a good Jew, one had to follow the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses clearly said that Jews and Gentiles must never eat together. So Peter is visiting Antioch and discovers that they don’t require this. They all sit around the table, Jews and Gentiles together and there is no problem. Peter decided that their way seemed to work OK and just went along with them. Sometime while he was there, someone questioned him about being a good Jew and eating with Gentiles. So he decided he better choose his company more carefully and then Paul got really angry with him for trying to make the Antioch Christians adhere to Jerusalem Christian rules and let him have it double barrel! This started one of the greatest arguments in church history. What qualifications must one have in order to be welcome at the table. Of course, Paul wins when he reminds everyone that keeping the law is basically the same as trying to earn God’s favor and that is impossible because we already have it, just by believing and having faith.

I imagine that Simon thought he might gain some points by inviting Jesus over for dinner. I expect that after Jesus dresses him down, he wished he had thought better of that. So if we come to try and earn God’s favor we have ample evidence that we are wasting our time. Do we think that praying or singing together will actually make God pay more attention to us? I have this 21st century picture of God with a giant

remote control in my mind. He is surfing through church channels on Sunday morning, trying to find something interesting to watch. I doubt that he finds us and says “Hmmm. Now that’s real good folks. For you, and for that great anthem, I will make it rain like you asked”. Or, “Now, now... you’ll know that is NOT what I said. Just for that, I am going to send a plague upon your air conditioning and you will suffer”! Do we really think that we can sway God either way by what we do here?

I suspect that mostly we come for insurance. We don’t know for sure that God is out there and in control of the universe. We can’t prove that Jesus is God incarnate. So just to be safe, to cover all our bases, we come to church. Do we want to be better people? Maybe; but lots of good people aren’t Christians. Do we like seeing our friends and enjoying fellowship together? You bet we do! But lots of people who are not Christians enjoy the same thing. How many of us actually come in hopes of gaining some great theological insight? Well, if that happens today, it is probably an accident! We come because we are looking for something, right? We come to try and fill that empty space that nags at us.

Well here is the problem: We have come to believe that we have to “get it all”. We think that if we can just believe ferociously, think deeply and act right all the time we can earn God’s love. We think we can create for ourselves that “special” relationship with God through Jesus that we want so badly. I had a friend who was ordained back in the late 70’s. We spent a good deal of time together and she used to tell me weekly all the times that God had spoken directly to her during the preceding week. In the bathroom when she was getting ready for work, in the car on the way home from work, in the kitchen while she maws preparing dinner. God seemed to always have a special message for her. The more she told me the more hacked off I got. I know I should have been happy for her. Who wouldn’t want to have a relationship like that? But I kept feeling somehow like I was missing the boat. I went to church. I prayed. I studied the Bible. I was in EFM for goodness sake! That has to be worth something! I ended up frustrated and disappointed and more often than not, feeling as though I had have failed. I didn’t get it. God didn’t speak to me. I am just ordinary. Why would God do anything special for me?

When it comes time for confession, we pull out our grocery lists of forgive me’s and “sorry about that’s” and call to mind all the times we have come up short. But just listing them does us no good. If you go to the doctor and just list the symptoms and then say “thanks for listening doc” and walk out the door...where is the healing in that? Instead of the grocery list of wrong doings we need to take an honest look at why we do what we do and why we think what we think and ask God for the strength to do something different.

I have come to believe that this is how evil works in our lives. First it tries to convince us that evil is only found in the really big things like war and global destruction, not in the day to day decisions we make. Then it tries to keep us focusing on the minute details so we miss the big picture. So after we beg for the forgiveness we already have but don’t really believe we need, we trudge up here to the altar for a meal in memory of a guy we have never met who some days appears to be weak like milk toast, and other days is confusing and confounding. And we do it week after week.

So, parents if you are dragging your children to church because you think you can protect them from making the same mistakes we have made, I am afraid you are mistaken. If you are dragging yourself here because you think that God will smile on you because you are a good prayer or a good singer, then you too are mistaken. Is there a right reason to come to church? I think there is. When we come out of need, out of gratitude and out of the need to re-connect. Is there a wrong reason to come? Yes there is. If you come hoping the gain favor with God or out of social obligation because “what would people think?” So why we come is important.

I can only speak for myself as far as why is concerned. I seem to keep forgetting that all this has already been done for me. I need to be reminded that Jesus has already died. Accepting that gift is all God requires of me. I don’t have to be special or extraordinary because Jesus said being yourself is enough. There are no rules or requirements beyond having faith to be welcomed at this table. No one is worthy, no one is good enough. To rely on your own strength, your own worthiness or to hide behind your own specialness is to essentially say that you are too good for Jesus. Worst of all: to engage in that bizarre type of self-righteous rudeness that says, “at least I’m not as bad as she is,” pretty much guarantees that you will never understand Jesus’ message that everyone is invited; everyone is offered the gifts of grace and forgiveness. This table is where we begin each Sunday. Listening, remembering, reflecting, re-engaging. Then, we are called to take those gifts, out into the world. And God willing, we’ll come back next week and start over again.