
Heart and Soul ... A Weekly Meditation

July 12, 2015

Why Go to Church?

*“Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised.
On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read.”
Luke 4:16 (Common English Bible)*

People are leaving the church – one major study indicates that people are scrambling for the exit doors of the church. Those who remain are becoming less frequent in worship. The felt need for a personal faith is undiminished. Religious convictions remain strong in our nation according to the same study. And many strive to live in a manner that is in accordance with those convictions. The difficulty is that people are becoming impatient with the church as an institution.

Luke’s Gospel records of Jesus, “On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did.” This observation is made as a sidebar in a larger narrative but it is noteworthy. What it tells us is that the personal habits of Jesus included as a priority the regular participation in corporate worship. Naturally, Jesus knew, as any of us that God can be worshipped anywhere. He could have found support in his day that holy moments can be realized in quiet meditation and private prayer, under the open sky. In fact, each of the four Gospels record Jesus doing just that – moments of prayer in a garden, upon a mountain and – agonizingly – upon a cross. Each place made sacred by prayer and personal worship. Nonetheless, on the day of the week when the faith community gathered for public worship, Jesus was present.

Close attention to the Gospel stories offer nuanced clues that much of the preaching Jesus heard was boring and the worship uninspiring. Yet, the fact of the matter is that the character of the worship services did not affect his attendance. For Jesus, the house of God was a spiritual home. It was where the people of God belonged. Participation in shared worship offered a reminder that life is lived for something larger and finer and more enduring than a preoccupation of the individual life. As Theodore Roosevelt once wrote to his wife, “I feel that as much as I enjoy loafing, there is something higher for which to live.”¹

Yet, right at the end of this brief verse in Luke’s Gospel lay the most compelling answer for the question, “Why go to church?” Jesus stood up to read. Corporate worship provides the opportunity of contribution, as well as the receiving of religious experience. A shared witness and a mutual encouragement in our faith journey are simply absent in private moments of worship and prayer. The church may struggle with tedium and uninspired worship from time to time. But worship is not about us – and our needs – as much as it is about the community of God’s people and how we might be used to strengthen one another.

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¹ David McCullough, *Mornings On Horseback* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 30.