

Church Matters

Week 4: Worship Gatherings

Hebrews 10:19-25

I love our Iglesia Hispana ministry and the work that Sergio and Norma and many others are doing. That worship gathering is growing each week, but I also love how involved they are in the community.

They provide English classes at the Library, they work with Habitat to do budgeting classes and translate documents for Hispanic families. They do Bible studies and service projects across the community. Provide counseling. They work with DCS to care for abused children.

I could go on and on about the outreach and ministry we have to the Hispanic community through Iglesia Hispana. It's incredible. And, to see the way they love and serve one another and come alongside of those in need...it's just one more reminder of why the Church Matters.

We're in week 4 of our Church Matters series and, over the last few weeks, we've spent some time laying out a theological foundation for why the Church matters. We've seen that the Church is God's plan for sharing the hope of Jesus with the world. The church matters because it's the family of God that loves and cares for each other. The church matters because, when we are united in Christ, we show the love of the Father to a world marred by division and hate.

With that foundation laid, we're now going to shift from theology to practice and see how the ministries of the Church, things like **Worship Gatherings, Connect Groups, and Serve Teams** help us be the Church that God created and desires for us to be.

So, that's where we're going over the next few weeks, and today, we're looking at why we gather for worship. So, if you have a Bible, or a Bible app you like to use, turn with me to Hebrews 10.

The book of Hebrews was written to followers of Jesus who had converted from Judaism. They grew up believing and practicing that God graciously took up residence in the Temple of Jerusalem. That His presence dwelled there inside this space called the Holy of Holies, a room separated by this tall, thick curtain.

Only the Great High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place once a year, on the Day of Atonement, and he could only do this once in his life. So, after going through a series of ritualistic cleansings, he would walk into this room, into the presence of God, while everyone else stood far off. He would atone for the sins of Israel and restore their relationship with God.

That's what the people who first received this letter believed and practiced. It was core to their faith and their worship. So, the author of Hebrews spends a bulk of this letter showing how Jesus changes all of this, including how we worship and think about the presence of God, and it

all culminates in our passage today. Look at it with me. Hebrews 10, starting in verse 19...(READ 10:19-21)

Let's pause right here. One of the things that happened at the death of Jesus is that the curtain that separated the Most Holy Place was torn from top to bottom. As if God Himself were saying, "There is no more separation between us." The author of Hebrews says that, when Jesus' body was torn on the cross, the way to God was opened up to everyone. We can now enter into God's presence with confidence because of Jesus' work on the cross.

And this beautiful, Theological truth that we can now live and move and breath in the presence of God has some incredible, practical application. Look at verse 22...(READ vs. 22-24)

The author gives us three ways we can respond in light of this access we now have to the Father. He says, **Let us draw near to God, hold onto hope, and encourage one another.**

He says, "Let us draw near to God." When we put our faith in the saving work of Christ on the cross, it doesn't matter where we've been, what we've done, we don't have to be afraid, we don't have to fear God or wonder if He loves us. If he's turned his back on us. Our lives have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus and our sins have been washed away. So we can confidently draw near to God.

We can hold onto the hope we have in Christ. A hope that the author refers to earlier as an "anchor for the soul." No matter what we walk through in life, our hope is firmly anchored in a God who is with us. A God we can rely on to be faithful to the end.

And, in response to God's presence in our lives, we can encourage each other, we **spur one another on**, to love like Jesus loved and serve like Jesus served.

I think it's funny, the word used for "spur" in verse 24 is most often translated "irritate." So, the author is giving us **not just** permission, but a command, to irritate one another. And, some of you are like, "Finally, a command I can follow!" I don't think that's what he means.

The image that came to mind was when you get a bottle of salad dressing out of the fridge and all the good stuff has settled to the bottom, what do you do? You shake it up. You irritate the stuff that has settled.

It's like the author knows we can get really comfortable and complacent in our faith to the point that it doesn't do anything for us or others. And so, we're to irritate, or shake up, one another's faith so we don't settle for something less than we've been called to. We're to provoke and push one another towards love and good deeds.

Now, don't miss the greater point the author is trying to make here. Our temptation is to think, "Well, if the presence of God is now open to anyone, anywhere, then I can worship wherever I want. I don't have to go to church to worship God." And that's true.

We've been given access to the Father through Jesus, so now we don't have to go to the Temple or to a building to worship Him. In fact, some of my favorite moments with God, times when I've felt closest to Him, have happened in my kayak on the water, or while hiking up a mountain, surrounded by His beauty and majesty.

And so, yes, we can draw near to God and hold onto hope by ourselves. But, notice that the author anchors these actions in community. He says, "**Let us** draw near to God." "**Let us** hold onto hope." And then he gives us a third command that we can't even keep apart from community. Again, he says...(READ vs. 24-25)

When we gather together as brothers and sisters in Christ, as the Church, not only do we encourage one another towards love and good deeds, but we encourage one another to draw near to God, to hold onto hope, and to keep living out our faith in a world where it can sometimes be really hard and we feel like we're alone.

That's why we gather as a Church family each week for worship and why it's so important for us to be together. The Church is the gathering of believers. None of us are the Church by ourselves. **WE** are the Church when we gather together as a community of faith. The Church is not a building, but the building becomes a Church when followers of Jesus gather in it to worship God and encourage one another. And there's something powerful that happens in this place when we do.

First, we **Encounter God in Worship**. Paul says in 1 Cor. 6 that we are the temple of God. That the presence of God lives in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. But earlier, in chapter 3, he says that together, we are the Temple. That God dwells in our midst when we gather for worship. So, when we come into this place, we come into the presence of God

And, I'll tell you, I think so many of us experienced that when we first regathered following COVID. I can't tell you how many people have told me over the last couple of years, "It's just so good to worship with people again." And that doesn't diminish the need for online church and the opportunities that it gives us to connect with people *literally* around the world, but there's nothing that can fully replace gathering together for worship.

I have a buddy who does some body building contests. He's one of those guys that tracks every calorie he takes in, measures out his carbs and protein at each meal. He said, "You know, Shawn, I can get my protein one of two ways. I can mix a powder into some water and get it like that. Or, I can grill up and nice, juicy ribeye steak." He said, online church is kind of like the protein powder. It'll get the job done, but it's not quite the same thing!"

And the reason it's not is because God's presence dwells among us when we gather together. Not because there's something about the building, but because of the Church that gathers in the building. It becomes a place where we can encounter God in worship.

Second, we gather to **renew our hope**. Jesus calls us to walk the narrow path and he says few will find it. Living out our faith in our culture, our jobs, our schools as teachers or students, it can be hard and that narrow path can feel pretty lonely sometimes. We can be tempted to take the easier road or to put our hope in our finances, or politics, or a relationship. Gathering for worship reminds us that our hope is in Jesus and that, while the narrow path may feel lonely, we're not alone.

Finally, we gather to **encourage one another**.

And, that encouragement starts as soon as you pull into the parking lot. We've got an incredible group of volunteers on our Welcome Team that serve from the street to the seat. Their smile and warmth help set the tone for our worship gatherings.

And, just a quick plug for them...they're always looking for more people to jump in and serve with them. And so, if you want to help make this a warm, welcoming place where people can encounter God in worship, they're doing a **Welcome Team Lunch** next Sunday after the 11am service. Stop by and get plugged in. It's a great way to serve and to encourage people as they come in to worship. You never know the difference your smile can make.

We gather to encourage one another. And, I'll be honest, there are some Sunday mornings when, it's been a rough week and God just feels kind of distant. Instead of preaching from the overflow of my heart, I go into the morning feeling like I'm scrapping from the bottom of the barrel.

But then I gather with you, my Church family. I see your love for one another. Some mornings, I just stand quietly and listen to you sing. I watch as you study the Word with me and walk faithfully through the things you're going through. There are Sundays when you shake up my faith when I need it. You all are an encouragement to me, just like I hope I can be an encouragement to you. In a way, we gather for worship to feed off of each other's faith.

One of my hobbies is grilling. And, while I love the convenience of a gas grill, there's nothing like the flavor you can get from charcoal. When I got my first charcoal grill, I quickly realized I didn't really know how to light the charcoal. My method was to put some coals on the grill, drown them in lighter fluid, throw a match on it and then duck and cover and pray that I didn't lose an eyebrow.

Then a friend showed me a little tool that changed everything for me. It's a **charcoal chimney (show picture)**. This thing is amazing. You load the bottom 1/3rd with wadded up newspaper and then fill the top 2/3rds with charcoal. Light the newspaper and in about 25 minutes, you have hot coals that are ready to go.

And, the genius behind this thing is that it uses the coals to light themselves. They're in such close proximity to one another that as one catches fire, it makes the one next to it burn hotter,

and the one next to it, and so on and so forth until eventually all of the coals are burning nice and hot, ready to get the job done.

I think the same thing happens when we gather together to worship. We encourage one another to draw closer to God. We encourage one another to hang onto hope and persevere. We encourage one another that we're not alone on this journey of faith. And we encourage one another to live out the mission Christ has called us to.

The Church matters and gathering to worship with the Church matters, too. Our faith burns hotter and is more effective in our life and the lives of others when we gather together.

So, may we not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing.

May we encourage each other to draw near to God and hold onto hope.

And may we gather to worship and then scatter to tell others about the love we've found in Jesus.