

“WHY GO TO CHURCH? II – TO BE WITH MY FAMILY
(MY CHURCH FAMILY)”

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I John 4:7-16

John 17:20-26

A number of years ago, after having been in the hospital, I was having trouble with one of my legs, so I started coming up here into the chancel area early. I could have stopped doing that after my leg improved, but I didn't because I had discovered something. I had a bird's eye view of all of you coming into the sanctuary every week – and I got to watch a sort-of “family reunion” week after week after week.

You ought to sit up here with me some time and watch. It will warm your heart. Hugs as you come into the room. People going over to say hello to each other, checking on each other, laughing with each other.

Sometimes I see visitors walk in, and watch as one of you talks to them or shows them the ropes. I see children being greeted, and watch people who need a little help being assisted to their pews.

And sometimes the gathering is pretty raucous – so much so that I have to say “Good Morning” several times to get your attention! And you know what? I think that's wonderful! The same thing happens at the passing of the peace on communion Sundays. The worship leaders and I laugh as we wait out all the hugging, kissing, and greetings to get to the pastoral prayer!

And it's all good – because it's a sign that we're a family – a church family. And, it's one of the reasons we come to church – to be with our family – our church family.

We're different from families by birth – we're a family by choice. We choose to come here, we choose to be a part of this church family. Oh absolutely, the first reason we come here is because we love God, and follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior – but we could do that in a hundred different churches in our area. All of us (well, except me – I was appointed to be here by the Bishop), but everyone else is here because you chose this place, this church, this family.

As I said last week, a lot of people of faith don't even go to church. I have some pastor friends, and there are many theologians as well, who maintain that you

can't be a Christian if you're not a part of a church. I don't think I want to go that far, but you sure can't be an engaged and growing Christian without being in church.

Writer Leonard Sweet once wrote that, "Jesus has a communal spirituality. He grows spiritually in his awareness of the divine through relationships, and draws strength from his encounters with people."

And he goes on to say that "God did not redeem us intellectually, but relationally. God comes to us through relationships, and Jesus' sayings and doings instruct us in the sacredness of relationships. Jesus walks into our lives not as a system of doctrine or as an answer to life's questions, but as a friend and companion who sticks closer to us than any sister or brother." (Leonard Sweet, *The Jesus Prescription for a Healthy Life*, p. 33)

So, Sweet says, "our church family is a place to connect and not be so isolated." Our church family, through the presence of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, blesses us with sacred relationships - brothers and sisters, fellow journeyers on the paths of life and faith.

And in this isolated, individualistic world of ours, what a blessing that is for all of us. Someone has said that we've become a nation of strangers. There are so many things that pull us apart, that keep us isolated. Surely fear does that. We've seen that lately in the wake of yet more shootings. We're afraid, we wonder if we're safe. We stay away from crowds, or places that make us vulnerable.

We don't interact with each other like we used to. I'm going to sound like I'm old right now, but I don't see kids playing outside the way we used to. We were outside all day long, only coming in when the street lights came on. So many people today are inside, in front of TVs and computers, never interacting with those around them. In fact, someone I read this week made a comment that made me cringe, because I'm guilty of it. He said that one of the great culprits in our cocooning, our hiding ourselves away is the automatic garage door opener. "We drive into our cul-de-sac, we flip the door up, we wheel the car in, we hit the button, and we're in our fortress. We don't have to connect with our neighbors, we don't have to give five minutes of our leisure, nothing." (On-line, "Being in God's Family")

It's not that I don't want to interact with my neighbors, I put my garage door down right after I drive in because of safety. After my house was robbed a few years ago, I'm a little more skittish.

But all of that is to say that we are a society that is increasingly more isolated from others. We talk via electronic devices - we text or Facebook, we

choose who we'll actually speak with depending on the number that comes up on caller ID. You know it's true!

Which is why I think the church, the church family, is life-giving. Because those barriers are torn down. We're here, in person, face to face, talking to each other, worshiping with each other, working with each other, giving life to each other. It's a beautiful thing!

So for a few moments more, I just want to lift up some of the reasons being a part of a church family matters so much.

First of all, it's empowering and even comforting, to be with others to grow in your faith. It's a joy to praise God with somebody else, and it's a comfort to travel on the road to faith with others. Some of the best times I've had in churches is struggling with others over spiritual questions, having honest and open discussions and studies together as we seek to know and do God's will. I think that's why so many people take part in spiritual formation opportunities here – Sunday School, Emmaus walks, youth group, men's, women's and youth retreats, circles, choirs – well, you name it. There's something so special about making the faith journey with others. We see what faith and grace look like.

I'll never forget reading Bishop William Willimon's account of something that happened to him as a child at church. He was in confirmation class, which was led by a stern woman named Mrs. Jones. Apparently, young Will missed the next to the last class, where the group had been told that for the last class, they were to get dressed up – girls in Sunday dresses, and boys with a shirt and tie – so that they could have their picture taken with the pastor for the bulletin.

Well, the day comes, everybody shows up in their Sunday best, except of course, Will who knew nothing about it. He was absolutely distraught and tried to hide out in the back of the room. He was just going to tell the pastor he had to leave, so that Mrs. Jones wouldn't get a hold of him.

So he went up to Pastor Herbert and said tearfully, "I didn't know I was supposed to wear a tie." Mrs. Jones, who was standing nearby, sarcastically retorted, "That's funny, because everybody else got the word."

At that, Pastor Herbert replied, "Well, well, no tie. Now, I have a tie on because I'm the preacher here and I'm supposed to have one. But you aren't the preacher, are you?" "No, sir."

"And I'm thinking," Pastor Herbert continued, "but I can't recall anywhere in the Bible that it says that you've got to have a tie to be in the church, can you Mrs. Jones?"

Mrs. Jones shook her head back and forth in silence, biting her lower lip.

“Well, if it’s not in the Bible, then it must not be important. You go ahead and join us Will. We’re glad to have you, tie or not.” (William Willimon, *What’s Right with the Church?*, p. 34)

Now, while that episode may not seem like such a big deal, William Willimon says that in that moment, in that church family, he understood what grace was all about – and it has stuck with him the rest of his life. He learned about faith and grace in that church family – and so can we all. We learn together and grow in faith together – one of the joys of being in a church family.

We also, being in a church family, come to know how much we matter, how much we’re cared for. I could ask any number of you about that, and you could tell me story after story, of the love and care you have received from this church family. Again, that doesn’t always happen out there – in the world.

Do you remember hearing about that little woman who went to the post office and stood in line every week to buy two stamps? And when she got to the counter, the postal worker told her that she didn’t need to stand and wait in line to buy stamps, she could just go over to the machine and buy a book of twenty stamps. Do you remember her reply? “Yes, I know, but the machine doesn’t ask about my arthritis.” (On-line, “A Place to Belong,” Scott Bayles, sermoncentral.com)

You see, she understands how much it matters that someone cares about you, asks about how you’re doing, loves you. Church families – this church family – does that with abundance. We do it in person, we do it in worship, we do it through our prayer list and our visitation. We care for one another, because every person matters.

A third and extremely important thing about church families is that we’re there in all the times of life – celebrating with you in the good times and supporting you in the bad – and once again, I know any number of you could testify to that. We gush over new babies, marriages, school news, job news. We celebrate birthdays – even 60th ones! We love to celebrate good times together.

But just as much, we love to support one another when times are not so good. That’s when our hearts really open up – to wrap our arms around those who are sick or struggling in some way, to care for those who grieve, to reach out and help those in need.

My mentor, Tom Short, used to love to quote Calvin and Hobbes, and I thought of him this week, when I came upon this. Calvin got dressed one day in his special clothes for school. He went to school, whereupon he sat upon some bubble

gum, got beat up by a bully, failed a test and got rained on, on the way home. At bedtime, he said, “You know Hobbes, some days even my lucky rocket ship underpants don’t help.” (Ibid.)

We all have had days like that, and isn’t it wonderful to know that our church family has our back when we do. That we have people to turn to who will console us, hug us, support us, help in any way they can. It’s one of the strengths of our church family.

While there are so many other strengths, let me mention just one more this morning, and it is this – our church family working together has the power to do incredible things. We see it all the time – why, just last week we gave nearly 40 units of blood to save lives; we filled countless college care packages to remind our students how much we love them; this week and next we’ll fill hundreds of grocery bags for the hungry; we’ll staff two weeks of the Rotating Homeless Shelter; continue to mentor students and partner with the staff at Thomson Estates Elementary School; fill shoeboxes that children around the world will have a Christmas. Earlier this year, we gave over \$14,000 to One Great Hour of Sharing. Together, this church family does incredible things – more than we could ever do individually.

We seem to bring out the best in each other, not just in giving, but in so many other ways as well. I have seen person after person step up and do things they never thought they could do, because they had the support and encouragement of our church family – whether that was something like joining the choir, or reading the Gospel lesson in worship, or going on a mission trip, teaching Sunday School, or entering the ordained ministry. People were able to do those things because this church family encouraged them and supported them.

Why do I go to church? Because of my family, my church family. Because with them and through them, I’m not isolated and alone, behind closed doors, but part of something big and wonderful. Because with them and through them, I grow in my faith and understand things like grace in a very real way. Because with them and through them, I know that I am loved and cared for, and if I need anything, they are there. Because with them and through them, I know I can be all that God created me to be, because I have their encouragement and support.

Friends, we’re not perfect, like all church families we have our ups and downs, and there are times we’re not the picture of Christian perfection, but that makes us like most families, doesn’t it? Thanks be to God for this church family, for the joy we experience together, the love we have for one another, and most especially for Jesus, who binds us together with cords that can never be broken, who binds us together with love! Thanks be to God!

Amen.

