



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Why Should We Belong to a Church?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 14, 2021

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Daniel 12:1-3; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:108

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

Why do you believe what you believe? It's a question we don't usually ponder. We have our beliefs, our core philosophies, our principles; but how did we acquire them? When you think about it, most of us have had parents, teachers, or other mentors—living examples, usually—who've helped us construct our most cherished beliefs. Some of us have also had the advantage of a relationship with a community of faith, a congregation that helped to inform, support, and form us.

Jesus was a prophet, yes, but a teacher as well, and he's often trying to enlighten the disciples with regards to the things that matter most. He's repeatedly turning their world view upside-down because the Messiah didn't come in the form they were expecting. The End of Days will not be what they expected. The first will be last, the last will be first, and so on and so forth. Jesus proclaims, "This is the beginning of the birth pangs..." And the disciples desperately struggle to understand what that actually means. Whatever it means, it implies something new is being born.

Baptism is the sacrament of new birth. In the Thanksgiving Over the Water, *The Book of Common Prayer* says, "We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit." Baptism is the primary entry rite into the Christian community and symbolizes a spiritual rebirth. Graham, Thomas, and Geraldine are about to become a part of this Christian community and you all will be witnesses to that blessed event.

The "lost and found" parables of Jesus tell us a lot about how Jesus understood Christian community. When Jesus tells the story of the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine and goes after the one, he's teaching the disciples what it means to be part of a Christian community. He shows us that the ninety-nine can't be the ninety-nine without the one. We are interconnected and interdependent in the Body of Christ, and we are not truly who we are without one another. Think about that for a moment. The ninety-nine cannot be the ninety-nine without the one. As that great civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer used to say, "Nobody's free until everybody's free." We are all one in the Body of Christ.

We're coming out of a nearly unprecedented time of pandemic when we could not all gather together in person for worship for a long time. For the first time in my entire ministry, I asked people *not* to come to church. We placed restrictions on attending worship and made terribly difficult decisions, all in the interest of keeping the most vulnerable members of our congregation safe.

Still, still I am aware that in the process of being careful, we helped people to get out of the habit of attending worship. We strained our sense of community. Now, just to be clear, I consider attending worship via the internet as an equivalent to attending in-person. I know it's not quite the same, and I know it has its sacramental challenges. But still, it has allowed many people to hear the word of God who would not have heard it otherwise. Our congregation has actually grown during the pandemic due to online participation. I also live in the real world and so I know not everyone will attend worship in-person every Sunday. People travel. People are out of the city and then back in the city again.

I'm reminded of that old, old story about the mother who came into her son's room one Sunday morning and said, "Son, you're late for church." And the sleepy son replied, "Mom, there are three reasons I'm not going to church. First, it's too early. Second, some of those folks at that church are really mean, and third, I just don't want to go."

And his mother replied, "Well, I'll give you three reasons why you are going to go to church. First, I'm your mother, and as long as you live under my roof, you're going to obey my rules. Second, you're 48 years old, and it's time you exhibited some responsible behavior. And third, you're the Rector of that congregation."

Everyone has days when they don't want to go to church. But when we don't attend worship in person or online, it's just a tiny little chip in the foundation. It's almost imperceptible. Most people won't even notice you weren't present, and they may never notice it. But you're not there, and so another person or a couple who has watched how regular you are in your attendance now feels they've been given permission to take a Sunday off. And so now there are two important people not present on the day when a visiting family attends church, and because they don't see anyone else their age or anyone with children like theirs, they decide this may not be the church for them. And because they don't join the parish, neither do their next-door neighbors. And, well, you get the drift. Everything is connected to everything.

The clergy, musicians, and choir members are quietly disheartened by a smaller attendance. The altar guild, flower guild, ushers and greeters all begin to wonder if all their efforts are worth it. There's also the power of "critical mass" in worship settings, and this is felt especially in great spaces like this one. When we don't have strong attendance, you can really feel it in this space because this place was designed for 600-800 people to be in worship together! People love Christmas and Easter here at St. Bart's in part because the building is packed. The singing becomes transcendent, and you can feel the electricity in the air when we are a full house.

The rite of baptism makes parents and godparents promise before God that they will raise the child being baptized in the Christian faith and life, and it's hard to raise a child in the Christian faith and life without taking the child to church on a regular basis. Showing up, as it turns out, is important.

There's a saying in Buddhism that goes something like, "You have to sweep the steps of the temple a lot in the hope that God appears." Attending church Sunday by Sunday is "sweeping the steps," and it prepares the heart and mind for holy encounters. You may come for weeks, sometimes months maybe, with nothing exceptional happening within you; and then, bang, there it is, right before your very eyes:

- a warm welcome from an 87-year-old woman who has discovered something in the Christian way of life that you're hoping to find;
- a psalm, perfectly sung, that tears at your heart;
- a cutout project presented for your inspection by a little girl who is so proud of her handiwork;
- a passage from scripture read with such feeling that it makes you suspect the Holy Spirit placed it in the lectionary just for you;
- a word in the sermon that sounds as though the preacher intuitively exactly what you're struggling with in your life;

- the bread dissolving in your mouth and the sudden consciousness that you are taking God into you, and God is inhabiting you and finding a dwelling place deep within you;
- the wine, sweet on the tongue, reminding you of the sacrifice and the glorious Gift.

We must spend enough time “sweeping the steps of the temple” to be open to the divine possibilities, so that, at the last, we will discover what it is to be in the presence of God.

We pray for preachers because we share in their struggle, and we are partners in the preaching endeavor. Preaching is a conversation which requires both compelling and thoughtful *speaking* as well as receptive and thoughtful *listening*.

While guilt is a lesser motivator, it's still a very powerful one. Was it a sense of guilt or was it duty that kept our parishes filled in an earlier era? Today very few people believe they will go to hell if they aren't regularly attending worship. But do we really need some sort of external threat to prompt us to do what we should wish to do on our own? Do we need to “guilted” into giving thanks to the God who provides us with every single thing we possess even—or perhaps especially—those things for which we worked so hard?

Too often we come to worship seeing our role as that of an audience member, expecting the clergy and the choir to serve as the actors on a stage, which would, I suppose, make God some kind of stagehand. Yet, in truth, Christian worship calls upon the congregation to be the actors, the clergy to be the stage hands, and God to be the audience who is, finally, the only observer whose opinion really matters.

The word *liturgy* in Greek means literally “the work of the people,” and I'm humbled by some of the people I see overcoming every obstacle to participate in worship. Like the mother and father who've set an alarm on Sunday morning. They've awakened and showered and then bathed, dressed, and fed three very independent children. They've made decisions about what the children can wear and which dolls or stuffed animals can join them in worship. They travel to the church wading through temper tantrums, bathroom breaks, and the kinds of questions children can only ask at the highest decibels. “Mommy, why is that man hanging on that giant cross?”

We don't feel we should push church on our children, and so the culture often pushes them towards video games or soccer or play dates or to this thing or that thing, developing an expectation for our children that life should be one long series of wondrous experiences to be enjoyed, one after another, in an endless consumer loop. It's easy to forget that the real purpose of parenthood is not simply to make children happy but to equip children to live lives of meaning and purpose. Christian congregations can help make that happen. Attending worship can help make that happen.

We have become so arrogant we actually feel we're entitled to our earthly existence and “all the blessings of this life” without ever needing to offer a single word of thanksgiving to the Creator, without ever providing even the smallest gesture of appreciation to God who makes all things possible. I'm telling you, going to church can move you.

- I am humbled by the sight of the older gentleman who slowly makes his way to the altar rail, depending upon his cane. He ignores my gestures that he doesn't need to kneel, and slowly goes to his knees to receive the sacraments, and then painfully, but without complaint, pulls himself up and makes his way back to his pew.
- I am moved by the woman who navigates her wheelchair between the pews and all the other obstacles we place in front of the disabled, because she refuses to miss the great Gift. She needs to hear words of hope each Sunday just as much as she needs air to breathe.

- I am moved by the alternatively-abled child who, at the peace, enthusiastically high-fives the man sitting next to him, bringing great big smiles to both their faces.
- I am moved by the hardworking couple who traveled for work so much during the previous week that they barely recognize one another. They desperately needed to sleep in, but they made it to church and find here the only truly tranquil moment of their entire week. At the peace, they lean in to kiss one another, and it is a sacred and beautiful moment.

There is, of course, this whole thing about the commandments: “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” Now most of the commandments don’t need to be argued. Murder? Bad, right! Lying? Stealing? All bad. Yet, “Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy” doesn’t seem to make most people’s top three list. For many, it doesn’t seem like anything they feel they actually need to be doing. But where do we get a chance to recharge in this life?

- When do we put our handheld devices down and disconnect from them?
- Where will we find the necessary silence to form our thoughts in order to be productive members of families, organizations, nations?
- Where will great music, great ritual, and great thought pour over us if not in the practice of sacred worship?

Why do you believe what you believe? In part, our beliefs and our values have been formed by participation in a community of faith like this one. In part, we have been shaped and educated by involvement in worship, educational programs, and outreach opportunities.

There’s a story about a peasant who came running up to a holy man who was resting under a tree. “The stone! The Stone! Give me the precious stone!” “What stone?” asked the holy man. “Last night I dreamed that I would find a holy man who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever,” replied the peasant. The holy man rummaged through his bag and pulled out a stone. “You probably mean this one,” he said as he handed it to the peasant. “I found it on the forest path a few days ago. You may certainly have it.”

The man looked at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond, probably the largest diamond in the whole world. He took it and walked away. All night he tossed about in bed, unable to sleep. Next day at the crack of dawn he woke the holy man and said, “Give me the wealth that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so easily.” It had finally come to the peasant: the wealth is not in the diamond. The wealth that makes such generosity possible is found in the faith we celebrate this day. When one has this precious gift, one can never be truly captured by anything the world has to offer.

“This is the beginning of the birth pangs,” Jesus proclaimed, and his disciples, including all of us, are still struggling to fully comprehend what that means. Whatever it means, it implies something new is being born.

Amen.

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