

Why?

“Why the Church?”

Matthew 28:16-20

The current three-week sermon series of “Why?” is based on the three questions Rev. Adam Hamilton, the lead pastor of Church of the Resurrection, asked himself and his partners when he started his church 27 years ago: Why do people need Christ?; Why do people need the Church?; and Why do people need this particular church?

Last Sunday, we looked at the first one, “Why Christ?” Rev. Hamilton answered the question this way: *“Jesus Christ is the solution to the deepest longings of the human heart. He is the answer to the most serious problems that plague our society.”*

And, I sought to answer the question with Jesus’s own words from the gospel of John. We recalled what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman he met at the well: *“Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water I give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”*

Why do people need Christ? People need Christ because he is the source of that living water, the true source of life. There is a spiritual void in our hearts, and we often try to fill it with empty things and activities, which always leave us thirsty. Jesus Christ gives us a drink from the spring of living water that quenches our thirst for true substance in our lives. It is Christ who gives those that encounter him with a heart of willingness the power to truly live, hope, and love. Christ, the good shepherd leads us away from the illusion of a hope rooted in our own self-sufficiency to the real, everlasting hope found in God.

This morning, we come to the second question: “Why Do People Need the Church?”

For generation upon generation, attending church was an expectation for all Christian believers in America. Going to church was simply what you did on Sunday mornings if you considered yourself to be a Christian. Whether or not you agreed with your church’s teachings or the pastor’s sermons, you showed up for Sunday School and worship service every week. Your attendance was never in doubt because it was your Christian duty.

Do you remember perfect attendance pins? These were pins for the people who attended Sunday school class or worship service for a whole year. Yes, all 52 Sundays! I remember them. When I was a little child, believe it or not, I got the pin of special recognition every year. The Sunday School was year around, and I never missed a single class! Of course, it certainly helped that I was a pastor’s kid. Looking back on it, I realize that my family never took a vacation!

Actually, at that time, whether you were a true Christian believer or not, belonging to a church was considered to be culturally, economically or politically advantageous. Plus, attending worship service on Sunday was not difficult, since on the day of worship, all the stores were closed anyway, and no entertainment activities were available.

But, things have drastically changed over the years. Today, the idea that you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian is a popular one in our culture. Three years ago, Donald Miller, the Christian author of Blue

Like Jazz, candidly revealed to his readers that he did not attend church regularly because he connected more with God in other ways. He wrote in one of his blog posts, "Why I Don't Go to Church Very Often, a Follow up Blog," the following:

"I'd say half of the most impactful people I know, who love Jesus and tear up at the mention of his name, who reach out to the poor and lonely and are fundamentally sound in their theology, who create institutions that feed hundreds of thousands, do not attend a traditional church service. Many of them speak at churches, but they have no home church and don't long for one."

You have probably heard some other statements like these:

"I am spiritual but not religious."

"I don't need the church to believe in God and Jesus."

"My relationship with God is a private matter. I don't need other people to tell me how to believe."

"I can worship God in my own way without being connected to a church."

"I love Jesus, but I don't care for the church."

"The church is full of hypocrites. They say that they are Christians, but their actions are so unchristian."

"I'm done with organized religion."

While a growing number of Christian believers have become disillusioned with the church and departed from it, there is another trend among church-goers. Even committed Christians, who are actively involved in their churches, attend worship service less often than before. This trend has been happening for some time among the mainline denominational churches like the United Methodist Church, but now, more conservative and evangelical churches, independent churches, and even mega churches are experiencing such a decline in the frequency of the attendance of its members.

Church experts say there are several reasons for this troubling trend that is now impacting almost every church, regardless of its denominational tie, size, and location:

1. With greater affluence, people have more options for leisure and social gatherings.
2. Again with greater affluence, travel is on the rise, both for business and personal pleasure. And, while traveling, people do not seek to find a church to worship in on Sunday.
3. There is higher focus on children's sports activities, and many of them happen on weekends and also require travel.
4. There are so many online options for worship and self-directed spirituality. So, people can worship and engage in a form of discipleship at anytime and anyplace.
5. Here is one more interesting observation - People do not feel guilty about not being in church on Sunday.

Surely, cultural Christianity is declining rapidly in our society, and we are part of the social change. Then, what can we say about the church? Why do people need the church?

In fairness, most of the statements made by people who claim to be Christians but refuse to be part of the church have a degree of truth to them. It's true that you can believe in God and Jesus without the church. It's true that you can find God anywhere, at school and at work, in the park and in the lake, on the beach and on the mountain, in the gym and on the golf course, in front of the TV and on the Internet, even in the movie theater and at the shopping mall.

It's true that most of the things that the church offers can be found elsewhere in civic life: social groups and interest groups, book clubs and lecture series, community service and mission trip opportunities, meditation and yoga classes, health and wellness programs, and all kinds of support groups.

It's also true that the church is full of hypocrites. It's full of brokenness. The church is far from being perfect. Actually, since its beginning, the church has never been perfect. The church has, is, and always will be a community of both sinners and saints, who are hurting and healing all at once. It is often a messy place for messed-up people who gather together in need of and searching for God's grace.

The church's story is the story of God calling the imperfect, often flawed people and equipping them for the work of salvation and transformation in the world. The church's story is the story of *God's* grace, *God's* power, and *God's* redemption.

Answering the question of why people need the church, Rev. Adam Hamilton writes in his book, Leading Beyond the Wall, that church is simply not an option for Christian believers because the Church is "*the incarnation of Jesus in the world today; it is charged with doing what Jesus did, speaking on behalf of Jesus, being his hands and voice. The Church is the vehicle of God's saving and transforming work in the world*" (p.24).

You can be a Christian and not be a part of the church or not actively participate in its activities. Our salvation does not depend on perfect attendance pins or even church membership for that matter. And, you can also accomplish the work Jesus calls you to do all by yourself. However, as Adam Hamilton notes, "The work of Jesus Christ can never reach its true potential when individual Christians try to go it alone" The story of our church's mission work is one of collaboration - from feeding and clothing the homeless, participating as Rosemary school readers, doing prison ministry, and etc - the tasks require the support of a community.

In today's scripture, Jesus himself clearly spelled out for us the mission of the church: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*"

Being an active presence in church is vital to the spiritual health and growth of each Christian believer. The church is essential for becoming a deeply committed Christian. It is in worship, fellowship, discipleship, service, and witness that we grow and become the people of God longs for us to be, and each of these means of growing in Christ is best accomplished within the context of the church.

As people need Christ, they also need the church. As Rev. Hamilton says, "Being a part of a healthy congregation is a source of great joy and the means for great growth and ministry in the life of a believer." May we discover this joy and growth together in the life of our church, supporting each other on our personal, yet collective journeys as Christian believers. May our church also be a welcoming and nurturing space for those God is ever-calling into a life of faith and a place from which we go forth boldly making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen!