

Scripture

Psalm 84

The Joy of Worship

84 Lord God All-Powerful,
your temple is so lovely!

2 Deep in my heart I long
for your temple,
and with all that I am
I sing joyful songs to you.

3 Lord God All-Powerful,
my King and my God,
sparrows find a home
near your altars;
swallows build nests there
to raise their young.

4 You bless everyone
who lives in your house,
and they sing your praises.

5 You bless all who depend
on you for their strength
and all who deeply desire
to visit your temple.

6 When they reach Dry Valley,
springs start flowing,
and the autumn rain fills it
with pools of water.

7 Your people grow stronger,
and you, the God of gods,
will be seen in Zion.

8 Lord God All-Powerful,
the God of Jacob,
please answer my prayer!

9 You are the shield
that protects your people,
and I am your chosen one.
Won't you smile on me?

10 One day in your temple
is better
than a thousand
anywhere else.

I would rather serve
in your house,
than live in the homes
of the wicked.

11 Our Lord and our God,
you are like the sun
and also like a shield.
You treat us with kindness
and with honor,
never denying any good thing
to those who live right.

12 Lord God All-Powerful,
you bless everyone
who trusts you.

Ephesians 2:11-22

11 So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called “the uncircumcision” by those who are called “the circumcision”—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— 12 remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. 15 He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, 16 and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. 17 So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 18 for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. 19 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, 20 built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 21 In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; 22 in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

Sermon

This is week two of why we do the things we do.

To recap, we began a couple of weeks ago with Jesus' question to his disciples 'who do you say I am?' The answer to that question is the very foundation of our faith and our identity as God's people.

That question flowed into a follow-up question: 'why do we do the things that we do?' Last week we looked at our celebration of the Eucharist, that we will share later this morning. We discovered that the reason that we do Communion together is to remember, to bring our focus back to Jesus – back to that first question of who Jesus is to us.

The topic for this weeks 'why do we do the things that we do' is church itself. Why do we come to church?

There are certain professions that come with some baggage – people react in certain predictable ways. If you're a doctor and you meet someone new it's likely that people will start sharing about their foot pain or asking to you inspect a suspicious mole on their back.

Lawyers elicit certain reactions from people, plumbers get regaled with tales of when the pipes backed up and flooded the basement with foul water.

As I interact with people out in the community – at the pool, at the grocery store, watching soccer games – once people find out that I'm a minister many of them feel a need to justify their religious qualifications/*bona fides*.

This usually comes in one of two forms. The first is a claim to pedigree. 'Well, my grandmother went to church. She taught Sunday school for years.'

The second, and more common reaction that I get is 'Oh, I'm a Christian too. But I don't go to church. I just believe on my own.'

Likely each of you know someone, or several someones, who say similar things.

Is this a valid statement for a Christian? After all, if our faith is primarily about what we believe, and more specifically what we believe about Jesus, then why can't we just believe what we believe and go about our business? If it's just between me and God, then why all of this?

There is a strong push these days to make sure that faith matters stay private. We are free to believe whatever we like, as long as we keep it to ourselves. After all, we wouldn't want one person's truth to encroach upon another person's truth.

There are several difficulties with trying to keep faith as a purely private matter though. The first is an epistemological or ontological difficulty. Once we start talking about my truth and your truth we strip truth of its objective reality.

When truth is purely relative, we are no longer concerned with what actually is, but rather we are only concerned with what we think. This would be ok if we were wise and all knowing, but we are finite beings with limited understanding. To elevate our perception above reality is not wise. When we do this we are no longer seeking God, but seeking ourselves.

For the world to make any sense at all, there has to be such a thing as truth that exists on its own. We can differ on our understanding and perception of it, but to reduce truth to mere opinion – what I think and what you think – is foolishness.

The second difficulty with keeping faith and belief as a purely private and internal matter is that it creates a divided self. There is a false belief out there that our professional and private lives can be separate things – thinking that what happens within the confines of the home does not affect what happens in the workplace.

But this raises an unresolvable difficulty. If what we do in private and what we do in public are unrelated, then we are essentially operating as two separate beings. There is private me, and public me. If this is truly the case, then my privately held belief can only affect some internal private part of me. Jesus' mission was to restore whole persons, not parts of them, therefore a private belief is necessarily incomplete. It's not restoration, it's a band-aid. At best, it is of limited value and utility.

As a culture we are learning that this private/public divide is foolishness. We are integrated beings. It's not valid for me to say that what I do in the privacy of my own home has no bearing on my professional role. I'm the same person in both places. The separation of public and private is an illusion. This is especially being demonstrated these days in public figures like politicians and media personalities. Think Cosby and Kavanaugh.

So far, we have seen that the very idea of holding a private truth that is true only for me elevates the self, because in relativizing truth we consider that our thinking is more real than the reality that we are thinking about. Once we have elevated our selves, we then shatter our self into separate personas, as though home me, minister me, father me, and husband me are different people.

Our privately held truths are not contributing to community, but instead do just the opposite. Common reality is what holds communities together – relativist truth fragments communities into individuals; who then are further subdivided into various personas and roles. It is a complete disintegration of culture and self; atomic individuation, reductionism to the extreme.

This is not the wholeness that Jesus offers. In fact, the idea of private individual salvation is a fairly modern concept. God's plan of reconciliation is much larger in scope.

When God called Abram, he did not call him to a private faith. God blessed Abram and said ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’ Gen 12:3 Abrams’ faith was never intended to be for him alone, but was his gift to share.

Likewise, our faith is not intended to be a private matter that somehow assures us of a distant heavenly salvation while having no discernable impact of the rest of our lives or the people around us.

What we believe must be lived out, otherwise it has little transformative value – on us or on the rest of creation. The church is the arena in which we practice our faith. It is our training ground, our refuge, our counselor’s office, our place of encouragement. It is the place where we seek God; it is the place in which we remember God.

In the book of Exodus we read ‘in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.’ Exodus 20:24

When we gather together to remember God, we can be sure that God will come to us. This building was built specifically to be such a gathering place. More importantly than the physical building, this community was founded as such a gathering.

In Matthew 18:20 Jesus declared ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ Again we read, God is to be found in our gatherings. We are able to experience God better while in the company of God’s people.

To be fair, that doesn’t always have to happen in the church – we can gather in homes, parks, schools, and legislatures – but the reality is that most of the time it is here that we are consciously seeking God. Within these walls, surrounded by the symbolism of the windows, the cross, the communion table, the pulpit, the organ, the pews – all of these elements together serve to remind us that we are here to commune with God. Everything in this place is intended to direct our attention toward the divine.

Without such a place, a place designed to direct our thoughts away from ourselves and toward Jesus, it is much easier to be distracted from faith matters. For many people, it is only here that they hear or read scripture. It is only here that they pray. It is only here that they explore matters of faith in any detail.

It is here that we encounter the community of God’s people. It is in this community of like-minded people that we can explore our faith and ask questions without fear of ridicule or rejection. We can share with others who have trod a different path and learn from them. In this place we love one another, encourage one another, support one another. We grow in faith, not as individuals, but together.

In this community we draw together in one faith, one baptism, one bread, one body. All that privatization fractures within our communities and our selves is healed as we pray together and pass the cup, drawing closer to one another as Jesus draws us closer to himself.

In a world that divides and polarizes, Jesus the healer brings unity, and he does so within his church first. This church is a Kingdom outpost in a hostile world.

It is important to note that the church is not like other social organizations. If it were, it would last a few generations and then fade away, as most organizations do. The church is a Kingdom outpost because Christ founded the church.

‘Upon this rock,’ said Jesus, ‘I will build my church.’ The Psalmist writes, ‘Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain.’

This assembly is a Christ-centred and Christ-ordained institution – that is where its transformative and unitive power comes from. And uniting is what the church is intended to do.

In our Ephesians reading this morning Paul wrote to the church community in Ephesus telling them that they used to be outsiders; without Christ, not part of God’s holy nation but strangers with no hope and without God in the world. They were fragmented.

But in Christ, those who were previously far away have been brought near. Jesus the healer has done this, ‘For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us.’ [Eph. 2:14]

He did this that he would ‘create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, and reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross’ [Eph. 2:15-16]

Jesus is creating a single community, a single body with himself as the head. God’s plan is that this blessing of peace and unification will extend to all peoples in all places, but for now, Jesus is reconciling the world and his church is the arena of reconciliation.

When we are united into this community through baptism and our profession of faith, then we become ‘no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.’ [Eph. 2:19]

We are one people ‘built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.’ [Eph. 2:20]

And finally, ‘In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.’ [Eph. 2:20]

Together, we are the dwelling place for God. Where two or three are gathered, there will we find Jesus.

So, to return to the question 'why do we do church?' the answer is that this is where we find Jesus. It is in this place that we intentionally turn our thoughts to Jesus. It is in this place that we can become open and vulnerable enough to begin to see Jesus in each other, and let others see Jesus in us. It is in the church and through the church that Jesus is doing his work of restoration and reconciliation.

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints

for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and my flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

I speak to you this morning in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.