

Why I love the Church: We encounter the living God

Message for Sunday, February 17, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Children's Message:

Romans 12:1, Good News Bible:

Because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you:
Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God,
dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is
the true worship that you should offer.

When we give our offering in church, we give money. It wasn't always that way. I've heard stories from retired ministers who tell me they sometimes got paid with chickens and eggs, maybe the occasional pig. Back then, people didn't have much money, but they had animals they could give to the church as their offering.

If we go back in time even further, to the time of the Bible, people would bring a sheep or a cow to worship as their offering. The minister—they were called "priests"—would take the animal and kill it. The priest would save part of the body to take home for his family to have something to eat. The rest of the body they would burn in a huge fire. When they burned the animal, it was called a "sacrifice." They were offering it to God.

The Bible passage we just read says "Offer yourself as a sacrifice." I'm going to do that. I'm going to lie down on the communion table. I'm going to take this sharp knife and I'm going to stab myself so that I'm dead (Note: the "sharp knife" was actually a rubber spatula, so the children could clearly see I was just pretending.) *Do it, and collapse, with my mouth hanging open, so I appear dead.*

But there's a problem with this: how does me being dead help God? Answer: It doesn't! Let's read that Bible passage again, more carefully: "Offer yourselves as a *living* sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service." What God wants is our lives, not our dead bodies.

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1) What is special about church? We meet God there.

I was talking with some people from other churches about attendance at worship services. Someone quoted the well-known saying that "I can know God just as well on the golf course as I can at church." Well! Mentioning golf was like putting a can of tuna in front of bunch of cats! The conversation really took off from there.

The consensus among several in the group was that golf is a complete waste of time, money and land. One woman summed it up: "I just can't imagine whatever possesses someone to knock a little ball around a field, just for the pleasure of making it go into a hole." Many of the others nodded their heads in agreement.

I quietly asked, "I take it, then, that you are not golfers?" They all replied yes. I went on. "I think this is an excellent example of why many people do not come to church. You are not golfers; you have never experienced the feeling of the golf club solidly connecting with the ball, and the satisfaction of seeing the ball go exactly where you want it to go. You have no motive for going out and wasting your time on such foolishness. You are on the outside, looking at something which is totally alien to you. Of course you're not interested! Now imagine that you are on the outside of the church. What goes on there is totally alien to you. Why on earth would you be the least bit interested in taking part in that?"

That's an important question. Why do *you* come to church?

There are probably as many answers as there are people here. Here are some likely responses:

- fellowship with friends
- habit
- enjoy the music
- a chance to get out of the house.
- and many more....

Those are all valid reasons. But you could meet those needs in many other places. What is special about being part of a church?

Let me give my answer with a story. Forty years ago I spent half a year living in Bolivia, a country in South America. I wanted to see how the rest of the world lived, and the best time to do that was before I took a

regular job. After all, it's hard to say to the boss, "Can I take a year off work to bum around?"

The first week there was the hardest. Even though I had taken intensive lessons in Spanish for a month before I left, there's a huge difference between listening to a recording of someone speaking clearly and distinctly, and people having a normal conversation. I knew the basics, but not much beyond that. The food and customs were strange. And I didn't know a soul there. I felt so alone and lost that I wanted to turn around and go home again. I made a promise to myself: "Stick it out for a week. If you still want to go home, you may go."

A couple of days later was Sunday. I went to a nearby church I had seen on one of my walks. The service had already begun, and I quickly found a seat near the back. I bowed my head in prayer, thankful to be able to worship God even in a strange land. Then came the disappointment. I didn't understand a word of the service. People around me were joining in the liturgy, speaking in unison and all at the right time. I mumbled along, hoping no one would notice. The songs were all strange—more mumbling. The sermon seemed to go on forever.

I kept looking at my watch and wondering how much more I could endure. Finally I decided that I would slip out during the next hymn. Just then the priest held up a piece of bread and broke it in half. He said something, and even though I didn't understand it, I knew he had said, "This is my body, broken for you." I sat up in my seat, because I knew what was coming next. He lifted up a cup, and again spoke some gibberish. But I knew he was saying, "This is my blood, poured out for you." When the time came for people to go forward to receive communion, I had no thought of leaving.

I met God during that worship service. All my life I've been going to church and meeting God. And I need God more today than ever. I would feel cheated if I went to church and didn't feel the touch of the supernatural in my life. I need to hear from God. I need to offer myself in worship. I need to talk with God. I need to know that God is in charge of my life, come what may, and that I can trust him. I long to draw closer to God, especially when life is full of stress and confusion.

King David of Israel understood this. He wrote in one of the Psalms:

Psalm 42:1-2, New International Version:
As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.

I can identify with David. You probably can, too. Sure, you come to church to see your friends, to sing, or for many other reasons. But if you don't meet God here, you likely would not keep coming, not for long.

2) Jesus promised to meet us at church

Jesus has promised that he will never leave us:

Matthew 28:20, New International Version:
"And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

So it's true: you *can* meet with Jesus on the golf course, at your desk, or in the supermarket. But Jesus also guaranteed to meet with us when we gather together for worship:

Matthew 18:20, New International Version:
"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

So which is better—to meet with Jesus individually or as a group? Wrong question—*both* are vital. Each one of us must make our own personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. We must nurture that relationship if we are to weather the storms of life. Plus, we must also join together in worship and fellowship. We are stronger as a team than as individuals.

3) Expect to meet God when you come to church

Suppose for a moment that our Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that he is going to visit this church. Let's say that he's going to be in the area, and he wanted to attend a local church on that Sunday and chose this one.

What kind of preparation would we make for that Sunday? Make sure the place is clean? Have the driveway plowed and the walk shoveled? Plan to have a lunch afterward? Check to make sure there's enough cream and sugar and juice, etc.? The choir prepare some special music? Or would we just rush in a minute before the service begins, without even

being here ahead of time to welcome him? Of course we'd get ready to welcome him!

Well guess what? Justin Trudeau hasn't told us he's coming... but the Ruler of the Universe has! If that's what we would do for a mere human leader, then how do we prepare to meet God?

James 4:8, New International Version:

**Come near to God and he will come near to you.
Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts.**

God invites us to worship, but we must be prepared. In some families, Saturday night or Sunday morning is bath time—time to get cleaned up and ready for church. We must get cleaned up on the inside as well: “purify your hearts.”

If someone says they don't meet God in church, it may be because they didn't prepare themselves. Do you get out of bed late in the morning, dress yourself in five minutes, and rush into church a minute before the service begins? Or do you take time to clean your heart and welcome God? The simple truth is, the more time you spend preparing to meet God, the more likely you are to actually encounter the Lord.

Here's a suggestion: plan to arrive 15 minutes early; then even if you're five minutes late, you'll still be here ten minutes ahead of time! Then you'll have time to greet your friends and welcome any visitors in church that day. But also take some time before the service begins to greet your Lord. Bow your head and humbly pray, “You are my God, and I've come to worship you.” Spend some time praising and thanking God.

Come to church with an attitude of anticipation. Believe that God will be present, anxious to meet with people who have come looking for him. Be open to whatever God may have for you that day. Make yourself a living offering, holy and pleasing to God. That is what worship is all about.

Next Steps:

- Pray: Just as you put your money in the offering plate, give yourself to God.

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- Make time through the week to meet with God. Spend time in the Bible and in prayer.
- Prepare yourself when you come to church for worship. The outside is minor; the inside is everything.