

“Still A Need for Church”

Hebrews 10:11-25

Do you ever start a movie or a book and think, “This is slow!” or “This is depressing!”? And then, as you hang on beyond the initial intro or first chapter, which you discover was necessary to give context to the whole story, the movie or book begins to get really good? That rhythm is how our message for today is structured. I want to begin at a slow, depressing, low point today. However, before I do, I want to assure you that good news will make it better before we are finished.

An article in the Washington Post, dated March 29, 2021, written by Sarah Pulliam Bailey, begins:

**“Church membership in the U.S. has fallen below the majority for the first time in nearly a century....** The proportion of Americans who consider themselves members of a church, synagogue or mosque has dropped below 50 percent, according to a poll from Gallup. It is the first time that has happened since Gallup first asked the question in 1937, when church membership was 73 percent.... In recent years, research data has shown a seismic shift in the U.S. population away from religious institutions and toward general disaffiliation, a trend that analysts say could have major implications for politics, business and how Americans group themselves. In 2020, 47 percent of Americans said they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. Gallup also found that the number of people who said religion was very important to them has fallen to 48 percent, a new low point in the polling since 2000.”

As I warned, this news is slow, depressing, and a low point, especially as we gather today as part of the Christian church, the body of Christ.

I would like to add to the Gallup poll research by touching on another rather alarming trend. This trend as I call it, is known as the debate between being spiritual and religious. Whereas there are many layers helping make the debate between spiritual and religious complex, I believe there is one particular layer worth giving special focus to today. That layer is the nature of individual verses community.

When asking someone about their involvement in church, a common response today is, “I am spiritual, not religious.” What this means exactly may depend on the person, but what I believe is implied behind the response is, “I don’t necessarily need to be in a particular place with particular people to believe in God. I am spiritual, and therefore, I don’t need religion, that is institution, tradition, and community, to be spiritual.”

What research around this debate has helped reveal is that religion, an institution made up of traditions within a community centered on belief in a supreme being, has tainted spirituality. Religion has tainted spirituality to the point some people disaffiliate with religion, or so called religious practices, like community worship, all together. What I have come to hear is that spiritual people still confess belief in God but offer disdain toward what we would call God's church.

Now, even though I can see how that plays out some, because the church is human and not perfect, it has hurt people and not always been true to God and God's ways, I believe there is something significantly missing in spirituality without participating in the life of the church. For the record, if you are someone who has been hurt by the church in some way, I am sorry. I am glad you are still here hopeful for God's continued work in you and all of us as God's children. Perseverance and endurance are key virtues in participating in God's call. If you know of someone claiming to be spiritual but not religious because they have been burned by the church somehow and desire no way of reconciling, I hope you will share your hope with them and encourage them. Being spiritual is great, believing in God is great, however, removing the life and ministries of the church experience from our spirituality taints our spiritual growth and ignores a significant element of God's call upon us. With all due respect to those who call themselves spiritual but not religious, being just spiritual is a copout implying simple commitment and a focus on the individual. Being just spiritual implies avoidance and turning a blind eye to the needs of others in community and everyone's needs to participate and share their God-given gifts to make the body complete. Religions were formed and have been empowered by the Spirit of God to help embrace and embody spirituality more fully.

No matter what this recent research may reveal, as you can clearly see, I believe there is still a need for church. Just because it is no longer the popular thing statistically, does not mean it is the wrong thing. Jesus built the first Christian church by first selecting a band of twelve misfits, as they have been called. Jesus, although right and true, was anything but popular.

The battle of the world and the church is not new. It has been a battle since Adam and Eve sought more out of the garden. The church has tried to stand against the world and popular pull away from God for centuries. The church has written creeds and confessions and gathered as congregations to gain strength in the power of God. The church is not something because we, it's people, are dependable and perfect. The church is something because of the power God gives us to be the body of his one and only, begotten and beloved, Son, our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

There is still a need for church, including both the spiritual and the religious. There is still a need for church because the purpose of the church is more than feel good emotions and comfort; more than money and buildings; more than rituals and traditions; more than memorial gifts and plaques with our names on them; more than our wants and desires; more than a rest stop in life for important celebrations and milestones. All of these things are fine and good with the right spirit and intention, but we must not forget that the church is about God and God's will. And because the church exists for God and God's will, no matter its frailties or popularity, there is still a need for the church.

Why? Thank you for asking. We need God and the church is created to be a beacon of light revealing who God is. We need community and the church provides community with God and community with others. We need purpose and mission, and in the power of God's spirit that melts us, molds us, fills us, and uses us, the church provides compassion and support in times of struggle and illness; provides encouragement and inspiration through singing and playing and proclamation; provides instruction for righteousness and salvation; provides awareness of others and purpose for life beyond ourselves; provides belonging and worth and value through its identity as Christ's body; provides opportunity to embody God's light, love, peace, hope, courage.

The article in the Washington Post I referenced as we began today offered this thought on the trends in church affiliation:

"We have to start thinking about what the world looks like in terms of politics, policy, social service," Burge said. "How do we feed the hungry, clothe the naked when Christians are half of what it was. Who picks up the slack, especially if the government isn't going to?" My response: "There is still a need for church."

Like the world today, the text we encounter in Hebrews paints the picture of a slow, depressing, low point for the church. Instead of living into the good news of salvation through Christ, which includes a life with true purpose, peace, joy, and love, the Hebrews were acting tired and discouraged. They were tired of living the Christian life in a culture that offered no support for it and they were discouraged about the way evil still seemed to persist in the world. Over time, they began to question the value of being followers of Christ and slowly began disaffiliating with Christ's body. At the heart of the problem for the early church was their simple commitment and lack of conviction to be the body of Christ empowered by the good news of all Christ had done for them. The world of sin and evil seemed to simply be accepted and go on unchanged, despite the greatest news, THE GOOD NEWS, of God's love being poured out in abundance through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the world's Savior. The power of Christ's sacrificial life and death, which gifted all the joy of salvation, was heard of and known but wasn't lived into.

Can we all agree that this was a problem? Would we go as far to say it is still a problem? Research would say it is still a problem. My questions for us today are: “Just because research says it is, does that make it right? Just because popular trend suggests it is, does that mean we should follow?”

I hope you would answer with me “no” to both. “No” because of the power and presence of the Spirit of God with us, calling us and empowering us to be the body of Christ, the church, still in this time and place.

The author of Hebrews made some suggestions to the tired and struggling church and those suggestions can still inspire us today. Paul would say there is still a need for church because it helps remind us of and instill in us confidence, hope, and belonging.

1. **Confidence**- vs. 22- “Let us approach life with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Let us no longer live in guilt and fear, for in Christ, we have been forgiven, and therefore, we can live with confidence.
2. **Hope**- vs. 23- “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering; for he who has promised is faithful.” Even though our outward circumstances might cause us to waver and question, we are to “hold fast” and live in hope because Christ is faithful. As we live, we are to pay more attention to the gospel we hear than to the evil we see. In Christ, the ultimate victory of life over death is already won. This is where our hope rests. God will never leave us or forsake us. God will not give up on us. God will continue to fight for and with us all.
3. **Belonging**- vs. 19, 24-25- “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another...” Ultimately, what the word “provoke” suggests is that we are to “stir up and spur on” each other in fulfilling our baptismal confession and call. We can’t do this if we aren’t connected and together. We need to meet together as God’s children so we can encourage one another to love and good deeds. The apostle Paul would say it is all about participating in the body of Christ, working with and for and through others in the family of faith. “We are not spectators of God’s work or simple recipients of God’s grace: we are active participants in the saving work of God in the world, as we follow Christ’s ultimate example of sacrificial giving, serving, and loving until the very end.” (Peter Wallace, FOTW, 307) The church is at its best when we come together with God and one another to worship God joyfully, grow spiritually, and provoke one another to love boldly and serve faithfully.

There is still a need for church. Perfect? No. Powerful? You bet because God is for us. And because God is for us, who can be against us. Let all God’s people say... Amen.