

Why Church?
John 17:6-19
Acts 16:16-34

“I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.”

This Sunday we begin a year of wrestling with the questions you have raised about faith and ethics, about the sense to be made of words in Scripture, about the meaning hidden in the heart of sorrow and disappointment and grief. The first question before us is simply “Why church?” I imagine it was asked in the spirit of, “Can you be a Christian by yourself?” “Is it possible to believe without belonging?” “Can I find God on the golf course or the soccer field of a Sunday morning?” Why church? It is the perfect question for Homecoming Sunday and at the end of a season when we have gone our separate ways. Here we are, together again, wondering why. Perhaps you have returned out of habit (which is not so bad as far as reasons go); or perhaps you have come back because, in the oft repeated words of Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, you “need and want the necessary discipline of praise, the rhythm—the great swinging movement of dark to light—of the [church’s] year...[and so know yourself to be] weightier [at the end of the summer], having missed the opportunity to meditate, express adoration, contrition, thanks, and supplication in loving and dignified communion with others.”

My first instinct, as *I* began to wrestle with your question, was pastoral. Why church? We need a community to do our living and dying in, our rejoicing and weeping, our hoping and beseeching. No doubt the church as a human institution has a constituency, in part, because here human needs are tended, the broken pieces of our lives are picked up in God’s name and intimations of meaning or purpose are made available for our common consideration.

Yet this begs the question and leads me to ask of you, “Why *church*?” Why *this* community? Why not simply do your living and your dying in the extended family or the

neighborhood or the affinity group of choice or AA? Last Sunday morning, I happened to catch part of an incredible conversation on NPR between Krista Tippet and Alain de Botton, a profoundly winsome atheist, who founded a community called “A School of Life.” People who do not believe in God, says Botton, nevertheless need ritual, community, beauty, tradition, ethics, wisdom, guidance. Human beings need a rhythm in life, a day set aside, for instance, to say “Sorry” (a day of atonement) and a day in the week when you gather with others to ask in common, “How shall we live?” (though he notes among atheists that the “How shall we die?” question is a question still in search of a more sophisticated answer). So in the morning once a week at “The School of Life” sermons are given, music sung, even the words of the Book of Common Worship are invoked. There are classes every evening on the great challenges of human existence where people become friends, support one another and pay for the privilege. All that seems to be missing, though apparently not much missed, is God.

Why church? If the answer to the question is about us and about meeting our needs, there are many communities that would seem to suffice. That is why we not only “church shop”; it is also why we drift in and out of the community as it suits our needs. But what if in the second place the question were not about us but about God? What if it makes all the difference in the world “In whose name?” and “To whom?” and “Toward what end?” we gather to give thanks and praise and confess and pray?

Why church? Consider the difference the subject of a community’s thanks, praise, confession and petition makes every moment in the life of its members. Take the simple act of eating bread. We do so, says theologian Matthew Boulton,

from a particular (usually unarticulated) point of view, on a particular footing, and thus in a particular style and form: we acquire it as a prize by our own economic ingenuity; or we steal it as plunder by our own cunning; or we seize it as part of a struggle for survival; or we receive it begrudgingly as our due; or we accept it gratefully, as a gift from a

friend; or we consume it carelessly, as an entitlement; or we devour it opportunistically, as a kind of fuel.

In every case, eating involves us in acts of thanks and praise and confession and petition: “sometimes thanksgiving to a neighbor, or thanksgiving to ourselves; sometimes praise of a benefactor; sometimes praise of our own good work. Whether we recognize it or not,” says Boulton, “we do live unavoidably and comprehensively in these patterns of gratitude, congratulation, confession, petition and so on. We appreciate, we acclaim, we admit, we appeal....But everything hangs on the basis, direction, and purpose of this invocation: ‘In whose name?’ ‘To whom?’ and ‘Toward what end?’”

Why church? The work of Sunday morning—known in most circles as liturgy—is the work of turning these lives of ours, that are “deeply curved in on ourselves” to borrow Martin Luther’s phrase, toward the God in whose name and to whom and for whom we were made, toward the neighbor whom we are commanded to love as ourselves, toward the stranger, the other. In a nation of people hell-bent on living to themselves, the church entertains this wild hope that word of the love with which we have been loved by God in Jesus Christ might shatter this well-defended world view. So love is acted out around a table on which the bread (bread that we did not acquire or steal or seize or receive begrudgingly as our due or consume carelessly as an entitlement or devour opportunistically) is offered to all without condition as a sign and a seal of the love we have neither earned nor deserve. This is no Sunday morning antidote for the hard week we have had and to which we will return; this is the foretaste of a whole new life in which bread eaten, wine drunk, water poured out, wind at our backs, shelter from the storm, work to do, a light in the darkness, a friend by our side turns us toward God in thanks and praise and confession and petition. Why church? Beyond the claim that we were made for this praise, we have been gathered by God’s address because we need to practice turning, at least one a week,

away from ourselves and open-heartedly toward the giver of all good things. I also think it should be obvious, by now, that we cannot practice *this* sort of thanks and praise and confession and petition by ourselves.

Neither, in the third place, do we practice this *for ourselves*, but for the world. Why church? “The church,” says Robert Jenson “is the gathering of two or three—or two or three thousand—to speak and hear the gospel....The church occurs in that the gospel occurs. Since the gospel is a promise directed to, and true of, precisely those who do not yet believe it, the reality of the church is its *mission*: its work of saying the gospel in the world, to the world.”

Jens goes on to observe that a great deal has been made recently about the church’s need to listen rather than to speak—“the action...is all out in the world and the church must let the world tell it what God is really doing. [The current jargon for that point of view, by the way, is *missional*.] To be sure,” Jens goes on

good listening is a chief human virtue and service, and the church as a human community ought practice it diligently. But listening is not the peculiar act of the church; the church is sent to get a specific word said in the world. Those who have not the stomach for this should seek some other society in which to be religious.

Do you hear how our question has been turned inside-out yet again! Why church? The church exists to say a particular word to the world. That word is the gospel and the gospel is a story that goes something like this in retrospect and presently: “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.” In prospect the word the church has to say takes the form of a very wild promise entrusted to us from the other side of the grave. The promise is: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” A word to the world on behalf of the world’s own future. A word of hope for love’s triumph. A word no other community that I know of exists to say. So the church says and has been saying for two thousand years things like: “Neither death nor life nor angels

nor principalities nor powers nor height nor depth nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God”; saying, “The dwelling [the home] of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God; God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Shorthand for these many words would be: God and not death is our destiny. Why church? If the church does not say this word, the word that is death and resurrection, it does not get said in the world.

Now you would think this word is the word the world has been longing to hear. You would think this except the story that is the gospel said in the flesh and blood of a first century Jew did not go so well in the world if you remember. Think about why this might be. Say to the death-dealing politics, the death-dealing powers, the death-dealing economic systems; say to the death-dealing exploiters of the poor and the sick, the elderly and the little child, of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the planet we inhabit; say to the death-dealing fundamentalists of any ideology or religion including Christianity that death has no dominion; that the murderous power with which you would control the earth no longer holds sway. Say the gospel and you will soon discover that you have said a dangerous word, a conspiratorial word, a threatening word, a destiny-cluing word that the world as it is cannot abide.

I think this was the reason Jesus’ prayed as he did at the end for those given him by God in the world--because the word he is, the word death could not conquer nor the tomb imprison, is now the word given to the church to say. When *that word* constitutes the church rather than all the moralistic words religious institutions say to conserve things as they are, then the ushers should begin to issue life-jackets and flares because the ship of faith as we know it is going down! That is why, more often than not, it is with only two or three that the word gets said. Like

Paul and Silas in Philippi who went about disturbing the peace of Roman rule for Jesus' sake and were beaten and thrown in prison for the effort.

Why church? Because finally if the gospel is a promise directed to, and true of, precisely those who do not yet believe it, then this is the only hour of the week when the gospel is directed toward us, the only hour of the week when these lives curved in on themselves are called out and stretched heavenward, the hour when our deepest need is addressed by a word not our own. So we return Sunday after Sunday saying "I believe. Help thou my unbelief!" Why church? Thanks be to God for the unspeakable gift of the gospel said and heard and the promise given us for the sake of the world God so loved.