

WHY DO WE OBSERVE SUNDAY?

November and December is Stewardship time at many of our churches. And while we ask for our annual pledges during this time, we must remember that stewardship isn't just about money, it's also about how we spent our *time*.

Our goal for financial support of our church's ministry is tithing, giving God not "the leftovers" but "the first fruits" of our income. The same should be true of our time. We should set aside the first and *best* of our time for God and his church. If we don't, we will quickly find we are giving him "the leftovers" again.

How do we manage our time so God gets our *best*? Many people say they're just too busy today, saying, "I just don't have time for church." For many people, recreation, clubs or social activities fill Sundays from dawn till dark. Even our poor children seem to have little time to themselves, what with school, homework, sports, extra-curricular activities — and an occasional hour together with the family. It bothers me that some school activities are now scheduled on Sundays, when those in charge *know* that this will prevent young people from getting to their church.

Our busy-ness reveals a troubling truth: for many today, recreation or social activities have become more sacred than God. Consider your own life, and ask yourself this question: *What is God getting from the time he has given me?* My first-fruits or my leftovers?

Time isn't the only problem. Where is our sacred relationship with God in our list of priorities? Some people just don't think worship is important and want to know, *why is it so important to worship together on Sunday?*

There are several reasons. The first — and most important — is Our Lord's own example. The gospels make clear that Jesus himself attended synagogue worship regularly. We find examples such as this: "And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, *as his custom was*, on the Sabbath day" (Luke 4:16). He was not only faithful in personal prayer, he was *regular* in gathering with fellow Jews to worship the Father and study Holy Scripture.

Following his example, the first Christians met frequently to pray together. While some continued to observe the Jewish Sabbath (many of the first Christians such as Peter, John and Paul were faithful Jews), the early church also began to gather weekly for Eucharistic worship on *Sunday*, which they named "The Lord's Day" because it was the day of Jesus' resurrection. This practice of Sunday worship has been maintained by faithful Christians for 2000 years (except for a few modern-day sects who have abandoned "the Lord's Day" in favor of meeting on Saturday, observing the Jewish Sabbath).

From the beginning, following our Lord's ascension, the Apostles and other disciples were devoted to corporate prayer: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers (Acts 1:14)...So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:41-42).

Further, until they were barred from the Jerusalem temple, the Apostles and other Jewish Christians continued to go to the temple for *corporate* prayer at the appointed hours (Acts 3:3). So corporate, "common" prayer has been the mark of faithful Christians since day one.

It's always easy to find reasons to excuse ourselves from our Christian responsibility to join one another weekly in prayer and worship. I myself have been guilty of this in the past. Making such excuses did not originate in modern times. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *not neglecting to meet together*, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:23-25). **We need to worship, and we need the prayerful support that comes from worshipping together, if we are to grow in spiritual depth.**

These truths have been recognized from the beginning of the Christian faith. In a small book called *The Didache* written in the 2nd century, we read this: "By day and by night, my son, remember he who speaks the word of God to you. Give him the honor you would give the Lord; for wherever the Lord's attributes are the subject of discourse, there the Lord is present. *Frequent the company of the saints daily*, so as to be edified by the conversation...Do not be like those who reach out to take, but draw back when the time comes for giving...In church make confession of your faults, and do not come to your prayers with a bad conscience...Assemble on *the Lord's Day*, and break bread and offer the Eucharist; but first make confession of your faults, so that your sacrifice may be a pure one."

We find this ancient and historic tradition of Christian worship embodied in our prayer book. It's called *The Book of Common Prayer* because it's the worship book of the *gathered* people of God. It teaches that "In corporate worship, we unite ourselves with others to acknowledge the holiness of God, to hear God's Word, to offer prayer, and to celebrate the sacraments" (BCP, p.

857). We also learn "The duty of all Christians is to follow Christ; *to come together week by week for corporate worship*; and to work, pray, and give for the spread of the kingdom of God" (BCP, p. 856).

This ancient practice is even incorporated in the national canons of our church: "Of the Due Celebration of Sunday. All persons within this church shall celebrate and keep the Lord's Day, commonly called Sunday, by *regular participation in the public worship of the church*, by hearing the Word of God read and taught, and by other acts of devotion and works of charity, using all godly and sober conversation" (Title II. Canon 1).

Despite the universal practice of the church, some today say, "I don't need church, I can worship on my own." One young woman once told me, "You don't have to go to church to be a Christian."

While there is a *partial* truth in both those claims, we also know — if we know Holy Scripture, Our Lord's own example, and the unbroken practice of the church — that both statements also contain a bit of falsehood.

Yes, you not only *can* worship by yourself at times. In fact, you *must!* Individual prayer, devotion, and Bible study are key to personal spiritual growth. But if we are in the business of being a Christian only for a *self-centered* purpose, *only* for our own spiritual benefit, then we are far from the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Jesus prayed privately on many occasions, but he *also* made sure he was in the synagogue every Sabbath. He didn't spend time developing his spiritual life just for his own benefit. He spent it developing spiritual strength in order to lay down

his life for you, and me. A Christianity that centers *only* on one's self and avoids other Christians is simply a counterfeit: it may look something like the real McCoy, but it stands convicted as false-faced before God our Father. A "solo" Christian is a contradiction in terms. He will end up self-centered, and self-serving. The Christ he claims to follow did not spend his whole life alone in the wilderness. He lived and moved among his people, and *worshipped* with them. Jesus calls us to love each other as he loves us. A person who wrongly believes he or she can do that in a vacuum — in some private spiritual test tube — has simply not understood the message of the gospel.

As to the second claim, yes, it's *partially* true to say you don't have to go to church to be a Christian. Every person who has received Christian baptism is a Christian. Perhaps he is a very weak one, perhaps a negligent one, perhaps one who is shriveling up like a spiritual prune — but a Christian nevertheless. But this second assertion also contains a shadowy lie, because it too is self-serving: "I don't need you other Christians to bother with, I'll just have a private relationship with God, thanks." If you have ever thought that, ask this: Did Jesus have just a *private* relationship with God? Where would you be left, if he had?

Is it important to worship each week? Let me share a story.

Once upon a time (not long ago, and not in a far away galaxy), two friends were talking over cups of coffee at work. One spoke of how meaningful and fruitful his life of worship was in his local church. The other man said, "Well, personally, I don't need other people to worship God. I have my own way of doing that by myself. I like to go out someplace in nature, and watch the sunrise, that sort of thing. I find that very peaceful."

"Really?" his friend asked. "That's interesting. You know, I felt a great sense of peace at church last Sunday. I love hearing scripture read. We always read three different lessons. I guess you do that regularly on your own then, while you're watching the sunrise?"

"Well...." the other man hesitated. "Actually, I don't really open my Bible much any more. I just kind of meditate, focus on my own thoughts."

"Oh. O.K. Well, at our church we always offer a lot of prayers for people during the service, you know, praying for people around us who are out of work, sick, ill, dying. I'm sure you do the same thing when you worship."

Well," his friend hesitated again, "I don't really do that much, either. I pray for myself, mostly. You know, I pray I'll become a better person, that sort of thing. Once in a while I might pray for my kids too."

"I see. You know, another thing we do every week is we all confess our sins together and ask God's forgiveness. But I'm *sure* you do that, as part of your private prayer time. Right?"

"No, actually, I don't do that much either. You know, I find that I just keep on sinning, so I don't really see much point in confessing anymore. God knows what I'm like."

"Yeah. That's true. Well, the other thing I find very nourishing at our church is that we receive the Lord's Supper each week. You know, 'Do this, in remembrance of me.' I suppose once in a while you do receive communion, since he told us to do this?"

"Well, no, I don't anymore. I just watch the sunrise, and think about God. I commune with nature. It's the way I choose to do things."

His friend hesitated, disturbed, but not wanting to sound mean-spirited. "So, how often do you do this, go out a watch the sunrise, and commune with nature?" "Well, I don't know. I think I did it at least twice last year." "So what you're saying — please don't take this wrong, I'm just curious — what you're saying is that you worship only by yourself, you don't even involve your wife or kids, you rarely pray for anyone except yourself, you don't confess sins anymore, you don't receive the sacrament Jesus himself gave us, and you hardly ever read your Bible."

"Yeah. I guess that's right. Basically." "I don't want to sound too critical," his friend said, "but I wonder, *who* are you really worshipping? Sounds like you're having the time of your life. But I wonder, is *God* having the time of your life?"

As stewards of the gift of time, we need to ask, *Am I faithful in worship? Am I giving God the first-fruits of my time, or the leftovers?* Is there really "no time" anymore for church, or is our priority chart stuck to the refrigerator upside down?

Stewardship is really pretty straightforward. Give God the first-fruits of our heart, and the first-fruits of our *time*, and the first-fruits of our resources will naturally follow. Jesus says, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." It works the other way round, too.

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