

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

We Believe in the Church

Sunday, November 4 2018

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1 Corinthians 12: 20-21, 24-27

If you are a Christian, do you have to attend church? Can you be a Christian without going to church? If you have ever asked these questions or know someone who has, this message is for you. I am going to address and answer those questions today as we continue our series, “We Believe: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters.”

In this series we are taking a closer look at the essential beliefs of our faith and how they apply to our lives today. What we believe is important because our beliefs determine our attitude and behavior.

On this All Saints Sunday we remember this statement we in the Creed: “I believe in the holy catholic church and the communion of the saints.”

Now right off the bat I want to address the nagging question that is on many of your minds right now. It is by far the most common question I get about the creed: Why do we say we believe in the *catholic* church? Aren't we Protestants? Aren't we United Methodists? Yes we are, but the word catholic in the creed does not mean what you think it means.

The word catholic does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church. The word means *universal*. We believe in the Church universal! We believe in the entire body of Christ, which includes Roman Catholics, but it also includes Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Greek Orthodox, etc. Any church that lifts up Jesus Christ as Lord is part of the body of Christ (disagreements on theology aside). We believe in the body of Christ as a living vessel of God in this world.

We believe we are the hands and feet of Christ in this world. We believe in the holy universal church! Today as I lift up our belief in the church I want to come at it by answering another very common question about the church. Maybe you have asked it. Maybe your friends or family have asked it. Chances are you have come across it in some fashion:

If you are a Christian, do you have to go to church? Yes! “If Jesus can rise from the dead, we can rise from the bed.” And now for the closing song and benediction...just kidding.

If you are a follower of Christ you must go to church. In fact, not only must you attend church, you must become active in the church. If you want to be a

healthy and growing Christian, church must be a priority in your life. Period.

Let me put it another way. Can you avoid church and still be a Christian? Yes, but not a very healthy one. Can you avoid your spouse and still be in a marriage? Yeah, but it will be a terrible one. Can you skip practice and still be a member of the team, yeah but you will be terrible on game day.

I will give 100 dollars to anyone who can introduce me to someone who is a healthy and growing Christian who is not active in a community of faith. If you are a Christ follower you must be active in a church.

Now I realize this upsets some people and it is not the popular thing to say these days, but that does not make it untrue. I know the easy thing to do is to be real casual about church attendance. But truth is truth. And if it's true that the culture wants pastors to be authentic, here is the authentic truth: Church attendance is not optional for Christians. There is no wiggle room there. And today I am going to tell you why.

The message today is based on and inspired by an article I read by Paul Prather, a pastor in Kentucky. After this message you will have a deeper appreciation for the church and why it is so important. You will also be able to respond to family and friends when they ask this question.

Now before I tell you why Christians must attend church, I want to be clear on a few things because I am sure some of you are thinking about them.

First, I am not saying those who are not Christians or those of a different religion should attend church. They are not obligated. If you are in that category today, we are glad you are here. Welcome. Today may give you new insight into the church.

Second, I am not saying that if you are a Christian and don't attend church that you are a terrible person or that you will lose your salvation.

Third, I am not saying you should stay in an unhealthy church with toxic leaders. If Christians are in a toxic church, they should leave and find another church.

Now that we that out of the way, hold on to your seats because here are some good reasons why we

believe in the church and why we believe it is not optional for Christians.

Christianity is a Team Sport

I have always loved baseball. I played a lot of baseball as a kid. I remember as a kid going to my backyard with my baseball glove and tennis ball and pitching to the brick chimney. I would pretend I was a pitcher for the Atlanta Braves playing in the World Series. I would imagine it being the final game, bottom of the ninth, and I would strike the batter out and win! Then I would run and hug my imaginary catcher. My parents would look outside the window wondering what the heck I was doing!

It was a lot of fun to day dream but the honest truth is I really wasn't playing baseball at all. I was just fantasizing. I saw myself as the best pitcher in the world but I wasn't playing baseball. Heck, I wasn't even practicing baseball!

To really see my true potential I needed to be throwing a real baseball on a real baseball field to a real catcher with a real batter and real infielders behind me. That is the only way I could know what I was made of.

It is the same way with being a Christian. You can't do it on your own. For you to reach your full potential as a Christian you must be serving Christ with other believers. That's the only way you can see what you are made of. You need to be using your gifts with a team of Christians. You can't do it alone.

The Apostle Paul described the same idea of the church using the human body as a metaphor:

There are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.
-1st Corinthians
12:20-21, 24-27

When you decided to become a Christian you entered one big cosmic body of Christ. It wasn't just about you and Jesus. You got a team jersey and were assigned a position on the field. You are part of the team. So when you don't show up for worship or "practice," not only do you suffer but the team suffers as well.

Those of you who have kids who are involved in sports, you wouldn't dream of having them miss practice or a game. Why would you even consider letting down the body of Christ, God's greatest hope for the world?

Christianity is not a spectator sport. It is a team sport and God need us on the field. God is counting on us! Here is another way to think about it. Paul Prather reminds us that each of us possess gifts and talents the church needs. If we are not active and present we are denying the church the benefit of our gifts.

This is why we say we believe in the "communion of the saints." We are saying we believe we are a team and we need each other. It also means all the saints who have gone before us are a "great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on. This language found in Hebrews denotes a large crowd in a stadium cheering on athletes. We believe the saints of yesterday are in heaven cheering us on.

I know this message is challenging, but I am reminded of what Tom Landry said, "Leadership is getting someone to do what they don't want to do, to achieve what they want to achieve." You want to grow as a church? These are things we need to know and do.

It is Not about You!

I am exhausted by the way our consumer culture has influenced the church. The church has turned into one big religious Carnival cruise line trying to cater to every whim and fancy. Pastors are not trained to be spiritual leaders anymore. They are trained to be entrepreneurs. And then we wonder why some churches are a mile wide and an inch deep.

This consumer mentality has caused a shift in many of those looking for a church. When many folks visit a church today they don't ask, "How can I be of service here? How can I get involved?" Instead they ask, "What can this church do for me?" And so they hop around from church to church hoping to find one that will meet all their needs. There is no such thing. Besides, when the church starts catering to every need, it diminishes God's vision for us to transform this world with the gospel.

I know many folks who treat church in Atlanta like free religious entertainment. They got to one church for worship and another church for Bible study and another church for kids programs, and so on. But they never take root in a church and grow. They want to go to the show but they don't want to grow. And then crisis hits and they don't have spiritual resources to deal with it. They need a support system and they don't have it because they never established themselves in a church.

The church is not a country club. We are not a religious resort. We are not a Disney cruise line. We are the body of Christ charged with being God's vessel for transformation this world. Yes I believe in being relevant and appealing. Yes I believe in meeting people where they are. Yes I believe in good programming but all of that serves the larger purpose of being the body of Christ for the transformation of the world. We're called by Christ to serve, not to be served.

I like how the Apostle Paul puts it:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. -Galatians 2:20

The Church Shows Us that God Can Use Anybody

I have said many times before that the church is not perfect. The church is made up of imperfect people. The church is made up of a bunch of hypocrites and I am chief among them. That's why we are here! We need a Savior! We are imperfect.

This means the church will disappoint you, annoy you, and make you mad. This means pastors, like me, will fail you and make mistakes. This means pastors and church members will not always live up to your expectations.

Church life and ministry is messy. We may look good and all put together on Sunday but the truth is we are all broken. This means Sunday morning in the church is like cooking sausage. The end result is real good, but you don't want to see it being done! And that goes for just about everything we do here in the church.

But what all this proves to us is how great God is because he can use anybody to do his work! I've seen God take the most unlikely people and do the unthinkable through them. The church is living proof of the amazing and transforming power and love of God.

The Bible reminds us over and over again that God can use anybody. Take a look:

1. Noah was a drunk
2. Abraham was too old
3. Isaac was a daydreamer
4. Jacob was a liar
5. Leah was ugly
6. Joseph was abused
7. Moses had a stuttering problem
8. Gideon was afraid
9. Samson had long hair and was a womanizer
10. Rahab was a prostitute
11. Jeremiah was too young

12. David was an adulterer (not to mention a murderer)
13. Elijah was suicidal
14. Isaiah preached naked
15. Jonah ran from God
16. Naomi was a widow
17. Job went bankrupt
18. John the Baptist ate bugs
19. Andrew lived in the shadow of his big brother
20. Peter denied Christ
21. All the disciples fell asleep while praying (and ran away when Jesus really needed them.)
22. Martha worried about everything
23. The Samaritan woman was divorced (more than once)
24. Mary Magdalene was demon-possessed
25. Zacchaeus was too small
26. Timothy had an ulcer
27. Paul was a Christian-killer
28. Oh...and Lazarus was dead

I love how Paul puts it in 2nd Corinthians:

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. -2nd Corinthians 12:9-10

Church-goers will Inspire You

Yes church folk will let you down and disappoint you, but they will also inspire you and expand your faith. Everyone in the church has a different experience of life and faith and their stories can teach us amazing things about God.

I think of the wonderful people who make up our church:

-Janine Gamache, sings in our choir and used to sing professionally singer in Puerto Rico.

-Doug Smith, played in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra for 40 years and blesses us with his gifts.

-Susan Smith, Doug's wife who was a neo natal nurse and saved the lives of countless children. Susan heads up our worship team.

-Consolini Twins are key volunteers of one of the largest Christmas charities in Atlanta.

-Wally Haislip, our finance chair, used to be the CFO of Scientific Atlanta.

-Miriam Troutman, owns the Johns Creek Chick-fil-a and trains our laity in hospitality.

I also think of the special people in this church who have experienced great suffering and have decided to use their wounds to help others by helping to lead and run support groups.

What about the children of this church who teach us in special ways. Lauren Hamilton, age 11, was on vacation with her family. When she heard they would not be home for church, she and her sister decided to plan an entire worship service themselves and lead it while on vacation. Lauren even wrote a sermon. Here is an excerpt from it:

1st Peter 2:9 says, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possessions that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness and into his wonderful light."

This text shows that God did not just put us on earth to live. He wants us to find ways to impact someone's life for the better – that may encourage them to continue the chain of love and kindness in the lives of other people. Think of things you like to do...find a way that can help someone...

Lord, pull me away from my phone and closer to you and family...

"And a little child shall lead them."

The church is the one place where you can be with a diverse group of people from all walks of life, from all generations, from difference experiences of life and faith and be enriched and inspired by them. Where else but church would you get that kind of experience?

Church-goers will Comfort You

Paul Prather puts it this way: "Yes, some Christians will disappoint you, but you'll also find disciples who'll sit beside you in court when your kid's up on drug charges, and who'll hold your hand when your spouse is lying in a coffin, and who'll bring you soup when you're sick with the flu, who will listen to you when you are angry or sad. When everything's going wrong, they'll assure you it's going to be OK in the end, because they — and God — have your back."

I wish I had a 100 bill for every time I have heard someone say, "I don't know what I would do without Johns Creek UMC." We would double our budget!

The Church Will Give You Plenty of Laughs!

Our previous church threw us a Baby shower and they displayed messages and advice from some of the kids in our church and preschool. One question they were asked was, "Where do babies come from?" One kid wrote "Publix!" Another kid wrote "Beer (slurps)." That child was wise beyond his years!

You want to know the best reason to come to church? The Bible commands it:

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another. —Hebrews 10:24-25

Church is not optional for Christians. After hearing why today, why would you want it to be? So I will see you next Sunday!

Today's message was based on Paul Prather's article, "Sorry, if you're a Christian, you need to go to church. Regularly." Here is a link to the article: <http://www.kentucky.com/living/religion/paul-prather/article137730183.html>



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