

JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Promises To Build On: Presence

Matthew 22:34-46

Sunday, October 29, 2023

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I actually love my job. It feels like such a deep privilege to be here and serve with you and alongside you. And I love coming to work and I love who I get to work with. Now, it's important that I tell you that because the next thing I am about to tell you is about to undercut that message, but stay with me.

Let me tell you about the minute each and every week where I think about quitting my job. It's always right around 8:25am on Sunday mornings each week. Or more accurately between 8:25-8:35 each week. What's significant about that time? Well, at 8:30 is when we are supposed to be in the car on the way to church. But I find myself in the middle of a pretty substantial shoe battle with one of my children as I am discovering that I have picked the wrong shoes or pants or shirt. I'm pleading and all I want, for the love of everything holy, please just please...you can wear whatever you want... just put on your shoes. I'll even put them on for you. Please!

Usually, it is at this moment as I am staring down at a single shoe in my hand, that I think: I would probably really be good at an office job.

Then I could give up and I could go into the kitchen and make waffles or whatever it is people do on Sundays when they don't have to go to church. I'm not exactly sure except I'm told from my friends a lot of times there's brunch food.

But the minute always passes and to date, I have not brought a child to church shoe-less, and we get here though I am always approximately 5-7 minutes later than I want to be.

And then I get here and we get ready for the services and Sunday school and something remarkable happens. You start showing up too. I am always amazed because I know you fought your own shoe battles to get here. And I know for some of you there were things much more difficult than everyday parenting struggles. I know for some of you there were so many reasons you could have said, "no" to being here. Grief, loss, chronic

illness, exhaustion, the busyness and demands of our lives. You could have chosen waffles! You could have chosen extra sleep and I would not have blamed you in the least. But you didn't. You chose to be here. Even if everything went wrong and you're 30 minutes late, you made it.

And I think, church is an amazing thing. Today we're going to talk some more about that and about the promise to offer our presence when we joined this church.

But first let's pray and hear our second scripture reading of the day.

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷ He said to him, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² "What do you think of the Messiah?c Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet" '?"

⁴⁵ If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?"

⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

This passage comes after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and the tensions are building between him and the religious leaders. They've come to trap him with a series of trick questions like the one we heard last week

about whether or not you should pay taxes. Questions about taxes always feel like a trick questions. Then a question about how many husbands you can have in heaven or something like that.

And then this question to test him which comes from an expert in the law. He asks Jesus which of all the 600+ laws in the Torah is the greatest one. And it's a good question if you are trying to test someone. Because whatever Jesus answers, it's going to reveal the heart of how he interprets the scripture. It's going to tell you how he measures the scriptures.

And Jesus answers with two commandments: love God with all your heart and soul and mind. And the second which he says is like it: love your neighbor as yourself.

Love God and love your neighbor. Jesus says all the rest of the laws and all the prophets hang on these two verses.

And it is hard to overstate how important this passage of Scripture (and it's corresponding stories on Mark and Luke) are to me as a Christian. They are my entire hermeneutical key. Which is a fancy way of saying that these two commandments are the lens by which I read all of scripture. The lens through which I try to make decisions in the world. Augustine said once when offering advice to new preachers: if you read a scripture passage and it doesn't make you love God and your neighbor, it's not the scripture text that's wrong; it's that you're reading it wrong. Read it again. All of scripture should make you love God and love your neighbor better.

And so as we turn to our question at hand today, the question of building on the promise of presence, I've been asking myself, how does the gift of our presence show our love of God and our love of neighbor?

We know we are able to love God anywhere we are. The Psalmist writes about how there is no where we can go where we can be separated from God's presence (even if we were swallowed up by a giant fish). You don't have to show up to church each week to meet God, to earn God's favor. Yes, we come to worship God, sing praises and pray, but you could do that in the woods or in your basement or while eating waffles.

So why church? Why worship? Why does God want us to come into a shared space and worship together? Why does God want us to love him not just by ourselves but also in community?

Because yes, I think choosing to come to church does show a love for God and a desire to spend time with God. But lately, I've been thinking about how the promise to be present at church also falls into the second commandment, perhaps ironically even more than the first.

According to the US Surgeons General's office, we are currently experiencing what they've labeled as an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. According to a report put out late this spring, over 58% of adults report experiencing loneliness and a loss of community. This was something that was happening even before the pandemic with similar numbers reported in 2019. This crosses genders and ages, with all groups experiencing over 50%. Parents and caregivers are especially likely to feel isolation and the younger generations, especially those are under the age of 25 feel this most significantly.

The surgeons general office put out this report because not only is this isolation leading to increased occurrences of mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, but it can also lead to physical health issues, increasing chances of heart disease and hypertension as well as increased likelihood of developing dementia in later life. One study showed that loneliness had as many negative effects on your health as smoking.

People are isolated. People are missing their communities. In a culture that gets busier and busier and fuller and fuller with less chances to actually connect, church stands as a quiet counter to that. A chance to be present with other people in both meaningful and mundane ways. And it's not always easy but it's real. Real community. Ways to both love and be loved by others.

One of my favorite authors, Rachel Held Evans, wrote about this aspect of church in her book *Searching for Sunday*. In one chapter, she reflects on the church where she grew up and what it taught her about community:

"She talked about how as a kid, she learned pretty quick that church doesn't start and stop with the hours of

service posted on the sign. Church showed up at the front door with a chicken casserole when the whole family had the flu. It gossiped in the pick-up line at school and babysat us on Friday evenings. It brought deviled eggs to the reception because someone remembered they were her favorite. It teased me and tugged at my pigtails and taught me how to sing. Church threw my dad a big surprise birthday party for his 40th birthday and let me in on the secret ahead of time. Church came to me far more than I went to it, and I'm glad."

Church was a place where she could be known and loved and safe. It gave her a safe landing spot, it gave her an identity and a people. Even when those people drove her crazy. It helped her know that God loved her and it helped her know she was beloved.

I think that this is actually the promise that we make when we promise to offer our presence. To enter in the everyday work of being in community together, to raise our voices together in prayer and singing, by showing up there even on the regular boring Sunday in September, of being in small groups, book clubs and Sunday school classes, fall festivals and camping trips and choir practices.

Research shows that the strongest relationships aren't actually built in times of crisis. They are built in happy times and celebrations and mundane times and all those moments in between.

It's the gift of offering our presence to one another and it's the beautiful and sacred act of being there for each other.

And it is one of the ways we love our neighbor as ourselves.

For some of us here today, the gift we can offer is just that we are here. We made it to our seats. And that is all we can offer in this season. And if that's you, if all you have right now is showing up when you can. I hope you know that's okay. For those of you fighting hard battles, carrying heavy burdens, the fact you are here is a gift. Stay as long as you need. There is a time for everything and it is okay if this is your time of healing, your time of rest. You made it here. It's enough. Even if you need to not be here some times, there's nowhere you can go where God's not with you. It's okay. Maybe your life is so filled with commitments that one more thing will break it and that's okay too. You made it here. And this is a season.

But maybe there are others here right now that are looking for ways to build on this vow of presence that you made. If you haven't joined a Sunday school class, we have so many good ones here. We even have ones that have a Zoom option if that's something you need. You can offer presence in digital spaces too. You could join one of our small groups. We'll be offering an advent study soon or you could join Pastor Pam's walking group on Wednesdays.

But also, and I know you know this one, we need children's Sunday school teachers. Tiffany makes it so easy to volunteer for her, she prepares everything in advance for you to step in and be present with the kids. To help them know that they are loved and they are known by getting to know them. We have such great kids here!

And this is a new one. We are trying to re-launch the hospitality team here at JCUMC, the one that was previously geared toward welcoming people who might be worshiping with us for the first time. We are looking for people who be willing to help us vision and rebuild that team so that we can offer connection to people coming through our doors for the first time.

As we get ready to wrap up, remember, it's okay if you have to miss sometimes. Because sometimes you will win the shoe battles and sometimes, the shoe battles are going to beat you. After all, God is everywhere and there are no perfect attendance awards for church. Sometimes the waffles will win the day.

What matters is the promise to be there for each other, with each other, holding faith for each other, praying with and for each other, showing up in the mundane and the joyful, in the tragic and in the whole spectrum of moments in between.

It's a commitment to be a community. To love each other as you love yourself. It's okay if the shoe battles beat you. It's about still committing to show up when you can, offer what you can and be a part of this community. To be present in the lives of one another, to love each other as you love yourself.



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