

## **Why Do Church?**

**Luke 15:1-10**

Why do we do it? That is, why do we, do Church? Over the years, as a pastor and priest, I've heard a lot of reasons some folks have for not doing church. Probably the one I've heard the most is, "I don't need to go to church because I can worship God by myself." (Translation: "Who needs to get up, get dressed, drive in, be harangued and then be asked to pay for the experience?")

We Pastors typically respond badly to that one. We point out that, while it's true you can worship God alone, most people who make that argument, don't actually spend their alone time worshiping. Chances are pretty good they aren't thinking about God at all; unless of course something goes wrong, then they might indeed mention God, but not necessarily worshipfully.

Yet, as someone who has stood on a high mountain peak praising God for a view that seems to go on forever, or has been moved by God's color palette in the fiery striations of the sky at a sunset, or felt the presence of God while "in the zone" during a long bike ride, I get it. If I can worship God, even experience God, on my own, why do church?

We just heard why in a parable from the Gospel According to Luke this morning. In the parable, the Good Shepherd is clearly a stand-in for Jesus. The shepherd has 100 sheep, says Jesus, but when one wanders off, the shepherd leaves the 99 (presumably somewhere safe), and searches for the lost one until he finds it. And when he does, he brings it back to the flock and then asks his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. Simply put, the Good Shepherd wants you and me with the flock, not apart from it.

So, why would Jesus want us to be together? **Well, first, it's to our own benefit.** Though the lone sheep may have been enjoying a great personal experience on its own, being with the flock is of greater benefit to the sheep, which, had it stayed apart from the flock, probably would've become a lamb dinner for a wolf or lion. There's a parable for those who try to live the spiritual life on their own. Just survival can consume all good intentions.

That speaks to us of one of the most important benefits of doing church: gaining a community of faith, of belonging, of being part of and celebrating something greater than ourselves. It's good to remember that we all benefit from sharing our spiritual life together. A faith community provides instruction for living a faithful and meaning-filled life. It supports us through the good and the bad times when circumstances, or even life itself, would seek to turn us from the path. It's here that we get feedback on our progress, and accountability for our weaknesses. It brings order to our lives, and constantly reminds us of the greater purposes than just ourselves that we are called to by God. Doing church puts the events of our lives in rhythm and perspective. I know for myself, that when I'm in that rhythm of life, if I miss worship, I feel it. Doing church benefits us; that's the first thing; it gives us community; a place to grow our spiritual selves with others.

**Here's the other reason Jesus gives us in this parable this morning for doing church: God is calling us here.** That's God's perspective on doing church. Perhaps the main reason to be present in the flock that is the church is simply because that's the place to which the Divine Shepherd gathers sheep.

And maybe that's the big point. Although we can enumerate benefits to our faith from being in church, the main reason for being here isn't for the benefits, but because it's where God wants us to be.

There is a popular misunderstanding out there about the spiritual life. Many people feel that their spiritual life is private; something that exists to be about and serve only ourselves. Now, your spiritual life and mine is indeed personal; the more personal the better to move us and draw us to grow deeper into it. But, it is not meant to be private; that is, something for ourselves alone. A truly growing spirituality pulls us out of ourselves, grows us into people who care about others, who see God's larger vision, and in serving that vision, discover our truest selves, and our own life's purpose.

It's an old family parable. I share it this morning because it fits here, and because I know it really happened. It happened to my father during his pastoral ministry. The idea to do it didn't originate with him, but this is what happened when he did. It was Winter, 1947, in a Central-Valley California church. A longtime member, a very active leader in the congregation, suddenly stopped coming. He'd been offended by something someone had done, or not done. After a few weeks, my father decided he'd better check-in on him. He went to the man's home and found him alone, sitting in front of a blazing winter fire. The parishioner invited my dad in and directed him to a comfortable chair by the hearth.

After an initial greeting, the two conversed over many things as they sat there, watching the roaring flames dance over the logs. Then Dad quite purposefully took the fire tongs and picked up a brightly burning ember from the center of the fire, and placed to one side of the hearth by itself. That lone ember's flame began to flicker and then went out. Though the conversation continued unabated, the man's eyes became transfixed on the ember. Soon it was a cold, gray coal, with no life or warmth whatsoever.

Then Dad picked up that same coal with the tongs, and placed it back

into the middle of the fire. Within seconds, it began to glow with light and warmth, ignited by the flames around it. The man continued to watch it as the conversation slowly wound down. Dad encouraged the man to come back to church, then left. It was an object lesson. Other than an invitation to return to the light and life of the congregation, no verbal reference was made to the ember or why Dad had moved it like that.

That Sunday the man was in church. After the service he shook my father's hand at the door and said, "Thanks for that ember sermon, Vicar. I'm back."

We can talk about all sorts of good benefits we receive from being here, but it's enough to notice that when we try to walk the spiritual path alone, try to live and grow spiritually without others, we tend to grow cold rather than glow with warmth; just like that ember. Rather than that fate, Jesus pulls us into the flock, toward community, to a growing spirituality; the place of renewing light, energy, and life. And that's why we do church!