

“Why Church?”  
Matthew 18:15-20

What does the word church evoke for you? When you hear that word what comes to your mind? Those who have had positive experiences of church have memories of loving people, favorite hymns, funny experiences, mission, and so on. But that is not the experience for many people. Some people even wonder why some of us even go to church. What are some common things you hear about why people don't think going to church is something for them? I have here a list of reasons for not washing that I would like to share with you because it is similar to some of things we hear about why people don't go to church.

**Why I never wash:**

I was forced to as a child.

People who wash are hypocrites - they think they are cleaner than everybody else.

There are so many different kinds of soap; I can't decide which one is best.

I wash only on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter.

None of my friends wash.

People who make soap are only after your money.

I don't like the songs people sing in the bathroom.

I can clean myself perfectly well whenever I pass a sink, so I don't need a bathtub.

The last time I washed, someone was rude to me.

Washing is for women and children.

I only believe in things I can see, and I can't see bacteria.

I watch other people washing on TV.

Washday is the only day I have to sleep in.

I know people who wash but don't act very clean.

While this list is funny, it brings into question for us the whole idea of church. Why bother with having a church? Is it really essential to our faith? And who even came up with this idea? In our Bible reading for today from Matthew 18 we see the word “church” used for the second time in this Gospel. But both times, the concept of church is not very well defined as a separate community from the Jewish synagogue. When we hear the word, “church,” we know that this word was used in a later period in history, during the time of the writing of the Book of Acts, and the Apostle Paul. In Hellenistic Greek, the word *ekklesia* (Greek for church) was commonly used of public assemblies, especially the assembly of free men who gathered in the theater to discuss civic affairs. So, the reference in our passage today is for the gathering of the people, the company of the disciples and followers of Christ. It is not so much about an institution as much it is about community. The unifying theme that frames the beginning and end of chapter 18 is the kingdom of heaven. So, the invitation is not so much to form an organization as much as it is to be part of a community that knows the reality of the kingdom of heaven. The core of the passage is in vs. 19-20. It is likely that this tradition can be traced to Jesus himself because this was part of the teachings of the rabbis about the value of community. The rabbis believed that whenever two Jews were together to discuss the Torah, the presence of God (*Shekinah*) was with them. The presence of the Spirit of Christ is the foundation for community.

Community is a basic component of the presence of Christ for each one of us. God's presence is known to each one of us individually and in community. If we are to have the fullness of God's presence, we need to experience God both in our personal lives and in community. Christian community is, as St. Benedict said, a “school for souls.” St. Teresa of Avila thought that relationships in community were often a greater indication of one's relationship to God than the heights of mystical prayer. Diana Chapman Walsh, president of Wellesley College wrote, “I ... come together... with people who bring out my better self, friends, with whom I can be... authentic... I make it a point to connect, whenever possible, with [people]

with whom I have a history of shared joy and shared pain... who... call forth in me this feeling of safety.”

Church is the community of people that is centered around the life and presence of the Spirit of Christ. Church is where we practice receiving and giving the love of God: The stories of faith, the intentional focus on the presence of God, and the intentional effort to serve others. This kind of community is at the essence of our spiritual journey. Parker Palmer, the Quaker teacher, wrote about the importance of community for our journey to wholeness, “We need trustworthy relationships, tenacious communities of support, if we are to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. The journey has solitary passages, to be sure, and yet it is simply too arduous to take without the assistance of others. And because we have such a vast capacity for self-delusion, we will inevitably get lost en route without correctives from outside of ourselves.” Even in times of conflict and disagreement, the church and the Christian community is an essential part of our journey. Barbara Brown Taylor, theologian and writer wrote being in community, “Like tumbling pebbles in a jar....rub up against each other...smoothing our rough edges. “ A good segment of our reading today is about the logistics of dealing with conflict and disagreement in the church because whenever community exists, conflict also exists. But the message is not to give up on community or to go start another church. The invitation is to grow through those times. Conflict is normally growth wanting to happen. Think of the many times when someone in church presented you with a different point of view that challenged you but then later on that disagreement turned into an opportunity for transformation. I stand before you today because of the many people who challenged and helped me to open up to new ways of prayer, understanding the Bible, communing with God and serving others. In his book, *The Dangerous Act of Worship*, Mark Labberton writes, “Worship sets us free from ourselves to be free for God and God’s purposes in the world...We are asleep to God’s heart for the poor and oppressed, absorbed with our own inner life,...Sunday morning worship is seen as discretionary to soccer games and long breakfasts. Personal Bible study is reduced to a kind of spiritual slot machine, where we hope for a jackpot to help us along the way, instead of being an experience that leads us into an entirely different frame of life. We underestimate the daily and weekly discipline of worship that is required to recalibrate the context that shapes our lives.”

This kind of community is something that is slipping away in our country today. This is especially evident in our youth and how isolated they are. Sociologist Christian Smith writes, “Significant numbers of teens today live their lives with little but the most distant adult direction and oversight. They spend the greater part of most weekdays in schools surrounded almost exclusively by their peers. Their parents are working and otherwise busy. Members of their extended family live in distant cities. Their teachers are largely preoccupied with discipline, classroom instruction, and grading. Their neighbors tend to stay out of each others’ business... When school lets out, it may be hours before a parent gets home from work. If a teen works, his or her coworkers are mostly other teenagers who are also flipping burgers or working cash registers; their supervisors may be adults, but teens have significant relationships with them beyond taking orders and collecting paychecks.”

The gift of community that we have here is the presence of Christ for each of us. On Tuesday, September 16<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 p.m. we are having a meeting for any of you who might be interested in being part of a small group circle. In order to be more connected to the amazing experience of the presence of Christ, I invite you to consider being part of a small group who meet to build community and to study and grow together.

Relationships and spending time with others are the key components to our spiritual health. A young man learned what’s most important in life from the guy next door. It had been some time since Jack had seen the old man. College, girls, career, and life itself got in the way. In fact, Jack moved across the country in pursuit of his dreams. There, in the rush of his busy life, Jack had little time to think about the past and often no time to spend with his wife and son. He was working on his future. Over the phone, his mother told him, “Mr. Belser died last night.

The funeral is Wednesday." Memories flashed through his mind like as he sat remembering his childhood days. "I loved that old house he lived in," Jack said. "You know, Jack, after your father died, Mr. Belser stepped in to make sure you had a man's influence in your life," she said. "He's the one who taught me carpentry," he said. "I wouldn't be in this business if it weren't for him. He spent a lot of time teaching me things he thought were important," Jack said. Jack caught the next flight to his hometown. Mr. Belser's funeral was small and uneventful. The night before he had to return home, Jack and his Mom stopped by to see the old house next door one more time. Standing in the doorway, Jack paused for a moment. The house was exactly as he remembered. Jack stopped suddenly. "What's wrong, Jack?" his Mom asked. "The box is gone," he said. "What box? " Mom asked. "There was a small gold box that he kept locked on top of his desk. I must have asked him a thousand times what was inside. All he'd ever tell me was 'the thing I value most,'" Jack said. It was gone. "Now I'll never know what was so valuable to him," Jack said. Jack returned home the following day. After two weeks, Jack discovered a note in his mailbox. The small box was old and looked like it had been mailed a hundred years ago. The handwriting was difficult to read, but the return address caught his attention. "Mr. Harold Belser" it read. Inside was the gold box and an envelope. Jack's hands shook as he read the note inside. "Upon my death, please forward this box and its contents to Jack Bennett. It's the thing I valued most in my life." A small key was taped to the letter that opened the box. Inside Jack found a beautiful gold pocket watch. Inside the case he found these words engraved: "Jack, Thanks for your time! Harold Belser." "The thing he valued most...was...my time." Jack held the watch for a few minutes, then called his office and cleared his appointments for the next two days. "Why?" Janet, his assistant asked. "I need some time to spend with my son," he said. "Oh, by the way, Janet...thanks for your time!" I am glad that you are here part of this community. Thank you for your time.....Amen.