



Why go to Church?





***The St. Paul Center for Theology and Prayer:
forming disciples of Jesus in every congregation***

The St. Paul Center for Theology and Prayer exists to form disciples of Jesus in every congregation by equipping and resourcing local congregations for the task of faith formation, teaching and learning, catechesis, and the life of prayer.

The Center, “housed” at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul with regional diocesan centers at St. Paul’s, Newburyport and St. Thomas, Taunton and an online presence, seeks to do this through at least three fundamental avenues: 1) continued theological education for priests and deacons; 2) theological training and spiritual formation for lay leaders, including for lay-licensing programs; and 3) coming alongside those discerning their vocation, lay and ordained, toward a deeper and more attentive life of prayer and discipleship.

<https://www.stpaulboston.org/tspc>

tspc@diomass.org

This booklet was written for the June 2023 TSPC workshop: “Why go to church?” by Jarred Mercer, Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Newburyport. We encourage you to use it in your congregations in a discussion group, or in whatever way is most fruitful in your context.

Being with God

The question, “Why go to church?” elicits all kinds of responses. Many people say they do not need to go to church because their spirituality is personal (by which they really mean private). Others might have been hurt by the Church in the past or see hypocrisy among Christians. Others might simply think they have better things to do, or more enjoyable ways of spending their time (what has come to be seen as the most scarce of commodities in our society). For those who go to church, they might speak movingly of the community and friendship it provides, the comfort it brings, and the ways in which they are able to serve others through the ministry of their church. Others will have known worship and prayer in the Church to be transformative and life changing. These all (mostly!) seem like valid reasons to go to church or not go to church. But surely if we are going to begin to answer this question, we have to begin with God. We go to church because of who we believe God to be. So we need to begin with the questions: “Who is God?” and, “Who are we?”

Christians do not have a philosophical definition of divinity. We don't have a preconceived idea of who God is or what God is like. We instead believe in a God who simply shows up. A God who comes to us and says, “This is what I am like!” This is in essence what we're saying when we use the word incarnation. This word comes from the Latin *incarnari*, which means “to be made flesh.” In Jesus Christ, God has shown up in human flesh, so that if we want to know what God is like, if we want to know

what it means to be divine, we look to Jesus. Christ's life, love, power, and grace show us what God's life, love, power, and grace are like when lived out on the human stage—when expressed in a way that we as humans can know and understand and receive. Because God has entered and inhabited human life in Christ, Christians come to know God by meeting God in and among us in the person of Jesus. Jesus is God touching with human hands, and humanity received into the touch of God's embrace.

This revelation of God through Christ's life is really important because God is God and we are not. Even with other people, we don't really know someone until they open up and reveal things about themselves to us. We might know generic things—they have green eyes or brown hair, they're a confident person or a shy person. And we might be able to have some ideas like this about God in the abstract: God is all-powerful and all-knowing, for example. But in the same way as "my wife has blond hair" says nothing about who she really is, these attributes of God don't really tell me much about who this triune God is either. It is only as God reveals Godself to us, only as God chooses to make Godself known, that we can begin to really know God.

And God has revealed Godself to us not by formulae or philosophical description, but by a story—by a life, life as we know and live it: by a *human* life. Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, has revealed who God is not by "one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance," to use the words of the Athanasian Creed—good and important words as they are! Jesus revealed who God is to us by, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side" (John 20:27), and

“Remember, I am with you always” (Matt. 28:20), and “Take, eat, this is my body” (Matt. 26:26). To put it another way that hits home in our current context: God revealed Godself to us *in person*.

And because God is revealed not in the abstract but in story, in the *human* story, we’ve become a part of that story. The story isn’t over, and we have a part to play. Because this revelation takes place on the human stage, in the life of Jesus, we learn not only who God is, but who we are, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus reveals what it means to be a fully human person, that is, a human person united to God in perfect love. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, is literally the union of God and humanity, literally in himself the full embrace of creation by the Creator, so that creation is drawn into this story of God’s love—so that we are all players in the drama of salvation. And since that full invitation into this drama through the life of Jesus, there has been a community of people who, through the gift of Christ’s Spirit, have sought to continue to live out this story of the union of God with creation. To use the words of the Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer, this community exists “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” This people, the Church, is even called Christ’s body—Christ’s continued, embodied, *in person* presence in the world through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. So that Christ’s promise to his followers: “I am with you always,” continues *incarnari*, “to be made flesh.”

This Body has always gathered together to worship, to serve others, and to proclaim the message of Jesus. But that seems to have been a challenge even from the beginning. The writer of the

Letter to the Hebrews is already dealing with this struggle and implores his readers not to “neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some” (Heb. 10:25). It’s not just overcommitted modern people with work, kids’ soccer games, travel, and family activities who struggle to make it to church. First-generation Christians struggled at times to be motivated to meet together, too. Why is this? We prioritize what is important to us, and certainly members of the Church, this Body of Christ in the world, believe the Church is important. But perhaps we lose sight at times why gathering, why “going” to church is an essential part of “being” the Church.

The word translated “Church” in the New Testament, *ekklesia*, means an assembly or gathering of people in a public place. It was the word for an assembly of citizens in ancient Greece. The Church, the body of Christ, is necessarily a gathered people. But why? So much of our culture of spirituality today tells us that we can go it alone, have our own private, “do-it-yourself” relationship with God, so what is it about being Christian, about being a member of Christ’s Body, that requires us to gather—to not only *be* the Church, but to *go* to church?

There are many ways to answer this question, and the next two sections will unfold this in more detail, but here, we need to begin with the foundation, which, again, is God, and more specifically, God-with-us, Emmanuel, God showing up in our midst, revealed in a way we can know and understand, touch and embrace; revealed in such a way as to show us both who God is and who we are, and to unite all that it is to be human to all that it is to be God.

Christians have often been called the people of the incarnation. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is at the core of who we are—it defines us. And it didn't just define us in the past but defines us as a people now and forever. God didn't show up among us in Christ and then leave us to our own devices to fend for ourselves. God continues to show up, remains truly present in and among us, as we continue to live the faith of the incarnation. Christianity is an earthy, gritty, embodied faith. And God didn't dwell with us for a time and then disappear—God remains near to us and continues to show up in the real stuff of life: in bread, wine, water, oil, and in one another.

We go to church to continue to meet with God, to be with God-with-us, God inhabiting our human space, and we do so most centrally in the Eucharist. Being with God is the whole point, and yes, God is with us everywhere. There is nowhere God is not. And God isn't more present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist than God is present in our laughter and tears, or in the Amazon rain forest, for that matter. God is not restricted to the sacraments. God has no limitations. But the thing is, we do. We are limited and need means to approach, acknowledge, and receive God's presence.

We cannot know or experience anything outside the limitations of our humanity. We can't know as dogs, or clouds, or trees, or as gods. We cannot know or experience anything in the abstract without that knowledge and experience filtering through our minds and senses—without it touching our humanness. And just as God so graciously came to us in the only way we are able to receive anything, humanly, so in God's bountiful goodness, God has gifted to us means of grace that continue to meet us in the

real, material, stuff of the world we live in. We go to church primarily to say “yes” to God’s gift; to receive God among us, to be with and in God’s presence in Christ by the Spirit, and to give thanks for it—to make Eucharist, a word that means “thanksgiving.”

So, God isn’t limited to the sacraments, but we are. God has gifted to us the sacraments because of our own limitations and because we need God’s continual touch in the real stuff of our world. It is certainly true that God’s is found among us everywhere, that the whole world is in some sense “sacramental.” The Church’s sacraments are a way into this reality, not a denial of it. While the Church has traditionally held that there are seven sacraments, twelfth-century theologian Hugh of St. Victor thought there were thirty! St. Hugh may have stretched things a bit, but at least he saw the world as “God-soaked”—something we tend to lose sight of today.

Our sacramental view of God’s creation depends upon us recognizing that God is here, that God is with us, and that God loves us endlessly. And in our post-enlightenment, late-modern world, the idea of God being present and active is a hard pill to swallow. This is perhaps where the rubber meets the road with some Christians’ struggle with fully appreciating the sacraments. We no longer seem capable of believing the world to be God-soaked. And this, among other things, has led us to live a functional denial of the incarnation; to pretend that God is somewhere “out there” away from us; to use language about being spiritually connected to the divine, but not that God is present in the real stuff of our lives.

But as the people of the incarnation, who acknowledge our own limitations and God's endless love and grace, we recognize our need to meet God among us in the sacramental life of the Church. We recognize our need to meet God in the real stuff of life. Which again brings us back to our foundation of why we go to church—to be with God.

Jesus is often called the primordial, or the first and greatest, sacrament. A sacrament is a sign that makes real, that effects what it signifies. So we can say that Jesus Christ, God the Word, reveals who God is. Christ is the life that speaks to us what God is like. Jesus points beyond himself to the love of God that he signifies. But we also say that Jesus doesn't just point beyond himself to God. Jesus *is* God among us. So that Jesus makes real, makes present, the very one he points to. And this is what the sacraments continue to do for us today. And the sacraments are redemptive, they bring us into God's story of salvation, because God's work in the sacraments is precisely the work salvation does.

God creates out of nothing, but in the sacraments, God is taking what already exists and recreating it, making it holy, changing it into something else—something new. And this renewal is what God's salvation of the world is. And God's salvation works this way, we meet God among us in this transformative way, because this is precisely what God did in Jesus, the first and greatest sacrament. In Jesus, God takes what already exists, our humanity, and makes it something new, something it wasn't before; makes us into something holy, something infused with God's grace and God's holistic presence by uniting us to Godself in perfect love.

And the sacraments we celebrate together when we gather, in particular the Eucharist, are a continuation of that transformative work of the incarnation. The Eucharist makes us who we are: “We are one body, because we all share in the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). We gather together, we go to church, because it is when we gather and celebrate the sacraments that we are becoming who we are. We are being renewed and transformed as we are united as Christ’s body, the continued presence of the incarnation through the Spirit, and as we become active agents in God’s redeeming story. We are never more ourselves than when we make Eucharist.

The Eucharist is something we make communally. The sacrament is not a consumer product, something sitting over in the corner of the room for us to pick up and play with, but an active, participatory, reality that *happens* when we come together and Christ shows up among us “where two or three are gathered” (Matt. 18:20).

This doesn’t mean that those who cannot gather, those who are sick or homebound, for instance, are not a part of this. We gather, we go to church, for them, too. In fact, every celebration of the Eucharist is with those present, for those present, and also with and for those who are not present. Because the gift of the Eucharist isn’t just another consumer product that we take and are nourished by (though we are nourished by it). It is the life of the world. The movement of God’s grace goes far beyond those gathered. So we come together to make Eucharist, yes, for and with those present, but also with those who are not present (the whole communion of saints) and for those who are not present (the life of the whole world). We will look more at this communal

and missional nature of going to church in the following two chapters, but it's important from the beginning to recognizing the expansive nature of what we're doing when we gather for worship.

Jesus is the triune love of God spilling out into the world, and this changes our vision of both God and ourselves. Jesus is the creature, the human being, who is also the perfect love and life of God—God's life inhabiting human life, so that in Christ human life is now joined to that perfect love and life of God; so that, because of Jesus, to be a human being now means to be caught up in the love that is God the Trinity. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is an invitation into divine love. And we go to church, we show up, because this invitation, this participation in God's love, is nowhere more clear, more certain, more holistic, than in the font of our baptism and in the sacrament of the altar.

Questions for Reflection

1. What does it mean for our daily lives that we know and love an “in person” God—God who is Emmanuel: God-with-us through the incarnation?
2. Is “going” to church an essential part of “being” the Church? Why or why not?
3. Why is the Eucharist the central act of Christian worship? And why do we need sacraments at all?

Being with Others

In the first chapter, we began to answer the question, “Why go to church?” by beginning with God, and particularly, beginning with God meeting us in Jesus Christ—being with God because God in Christ is God-with-us. In this chapter we will build on that reality by leaning into that “us.” We love God by loving one another and love one another through love for God. Or, to think of this another way: union with God, which is the aim of our existence, is inseparable from union with one another. To be united to God in Christ is to be united to God as Christ’s unified body.

We use that term “Body of Christ” in different ways. One is for the Church and the other is for that union of God and humanity in that body that was broken and restored for us, that body we make present at every Eucharist. And these two go hand in hand. To quote the twentieth-century theologian Henri de Lubac, “The Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church.” And because of this the Church takes on a kind of sacramental reality in itself. The Church is the result of Christ’s salvation, and it points to that salvation through its life and proclamation, but the Church is also the instrument that brings that salvation about as we are incorporated into the “body,” into union with Christ, through our baptism and the Eucharist. In other words, through entering the Church. So, as the Church’s sacraments, the Church itself is a sign that makes real, makes present the reality it signifies—the unity of one body.

For this reason, the Church has at times been called the “sacrament of unity” that unites people both to Christ and to one another. And this body is in relationship to the head, who is Christ. The Church is not Christ! But is brought into a relationship to Christ of dependence and love, a relationship that brings our lives continually into conversation with Jesus’ life—continually calling us to something deeper, something richer; continually calling us to repentance and change. And as a result of this relationship to Christ, we are brought into a new relationship with one another, and it is a relationship of radical protest and transformation in our divided world.

In the Eucharist, as in our baptism, every one of us, regardless of the color of our skin, our gender or sexual identity, our age, abilities, our social or economic status—people who in many other places in our divided world would not even be comfortable under same roof together—gather and receive the same life-giving bread and call each other one body and one family. There is perhaps no more radical act in our world than this. Against all odds, we become what we proclaim in the Eucharist—the body of Christ. To borrow Ludwig Feuerbach’s words, “we are what we eat.”

This is why the Church is most itself in the Eucharist. We are becoming who we are. We go to church to be ourselves. Our celebration of the Eucharist is also where the mission of God in the Church is most clearly lived out in the world, where God is bringing us to Godself, as it is the continuation of the incarnation. This is where we join in the story of God’s salvation. We join in Christ’s prayer, we join in Christ’s offering of himself,

and we do so as *ourselves*—in our own poverty and want, in our own sin and struggle, in all that we are. And here we have the whole of our salvation, all that we are is wrapped up in the sacrifice of Jesus' crucifixion and the glory of his resurrection.

And so the Eucharist is often called a “sacrifice,” which has nothing to do with violent, bloody, images that our minds conjure up with that word. The word sacrifice comes from the Latin, “to make holy,” and we speak of the Eucharist in this way because in it earthly, created things—bread, wine, ourselves—are renewed and recreated, set apart and made holy by participating in the holiness of Jesus. This “sacrifice” is an “offering up” and making holy of the ordinary and mundane. It's a bringing of creation into the mystery of God's redeeming work, so that “the fruit of the earth and work of human hands,” and even those human hands themselves, become the raw materials of the new creation.

In the Eucharist we are most ourselves, we are made the Church, because we are united to Christ's offering of himself. In the incarnation, Christ assumes human nature, walks through our human life, brings that humanity through death into new, resurrection life, and carries it as an offering to God. Jesus, crucified and risen, comes before God and says, “this earthy, raw, humanity, this is now a part of who I am, this is what I have to give,” and we are welcomed into God's warm embrace. So we are joined to Christ's offering, Christ's sacrifice, as we make that offering present in our lives now in the Eucharist. On the cross Christ is sacrificed for us, his life is given, offered, for the world. God is offered to and for humanity in Christ, but we are also offered, in all that we are, to God in Christ—the wounds of the

world, carried in the wounds of Christ, are received by God's healing touch. So that we are receiving Christ's offering, Christ's gift of himself, in the Eucharist, but we are also making an offering—becoming ourselves a part of that gift. In the Eucharist we are gifted Christ, but we are also becoming a gift ourselves—gifted by Christ and through Christ and in Christ to God's embrace and gifted back ourselves, renewed and reconciled in love.

So, we go to church to live a life of offering by sharing in Jesus' own offering of himself, and of each of us, for healing, forgiveness, and redemption. Each of us, gifted to God in Christ's gift of himself, and each of us gifted back ourselves anew, sharing in the renewal of Christ's resurrection, and made into gifts to one another. In other words, the Eucharist shapes eucharistic lives—lives on offer for the life of the world. And this means we get to bring our whole selves for transformation, for that renewal. God isn't only interested in the nice, pretty, safe bits of us, but the whole of our lives. We bring our frustrations and anger, our grief and sorrow, our joy and contentment, the argument we had with the kids who were getting ready for church too slow, the distractions of our to-do list or work tasks that kept us from listening to the sermon, and the deep wounds and joys of our lives, all of it, and are gifted back ourselves anew.

This brings us to another important aspect of why we gather for worship as a community—why we, as the Church, go to church. We go to church because we aren't yet finished products; because we need transformation and renewal; because we are not yet whole and need one another, need our life together, and need this participation in the story of Jesus in the Eucharist. Our

communal worship is an important part of this transformation. It gives us something reading and study and prayer on our own cannot provide (as important as those things are). It offers to us what individual spiritual disciplines cannot (as important as they are).

The story of God's love in the world, that story in which we still have a role to play, isn't over yet. We find ourselves wrapped up in it, in dialogue with it, as we are transformed by and into it by participating in Christ's offering in the Eucharist. The liturgical expression of our life together, the gathered, worshipping community, is a microcosm of our whole being—an interrogation of our lives that, sometimes slowly over time, sometimes with pain and difficulty, and always with joy and fullness, pulls the truth out of us—the truth about God, the world, and ourselves—and orients our living toward that truth. In other words, the life searched by the story of Jesus, brought into dialogue with it, is the life transformed. The life that enters the story of Christ's self-giving love in the eucharistic fellowship of the Church continues to live that story, giving itself away with all the risk and uncertainty that entails, trusting in what it has received. Worship is our whole story. It is the entirety of our lives.

Gathering with others, our communal worship as the Church, is, or at least should be, deeply transformative. True worship, adoration, de-centers the self and turns us outward toward God. True worship is then an act of repentance, of changing our minds about God, ourselves, and others, as we are turned outward beyond our self-serving tendencies and offered as a gift to God and others. This is a far cry from the often-sentimentalized

expressions of worship that revolve around filling oneself up, satisfying personal preferences, and often comfortingly confirming one's own ideas about who God is or what God is doing in our lives and our world.

In other words, while our worship together in church is in many ways comforting, a place where we feel secure and at home, true worship should also be a holy disturbance. It disturbs our vision of ourselves and our world and opens us up to God's surprising work in our lives, calling us to transformation. We should examine in our life of worship the moments of holy conflict that arise in our prayer, our listening, our liturgical life as the Church. Where are the points where we're being called into repentance and change? Where am I noticing discomfort or friction in my life with the message of Jesus and the hope of the Gospel? These are key turning points where we are confronted with the choice to choose right worship—adoration that turns outward beyond ourselves—or to choose self-exaltation and idolatry, or false worship.

To be fully human, to live into the fullness of who we are created to be, is to participate in the life of the Triune God—to, in Christ and by the Spirit, enter and share in that life of offering. Worship is what makes us human, makes us who we are. To turn outward in adoration, to participate in the life of the self-giving love of God is what we are made for. It's been said that we are not just reasoning humans, *homo sapiens*, but worshiping ones, *homo adorans*.

Now, we all know all kinds of people who do not worship God in any way, and they are still very much human! But because we

are necessarily worshiping beings, just because we aren't offering our worship, our adoration, our reaching out beyond ourselves to God, that does not mean we are not always worshiping something. We are always desiring, always directing ourselves toward something, always reaching out, always worshiping—we are just not always worshiping, desiring, loving in the right direction.

So, we're always worshiping, no matter who we are or what we're doing, and we go to church and participate in communal worship together to learn to worship rightly, to learn to love in the right direction. We cannot do this alone, this isn't a "do it yourself" spirituality but a life together that depends on the movement of the whole body. When we go to church and gather together for worship, we are molding each other, we are joining in with the communion of saints throughout the world and the centuries, and with our fellow Christians in our time and place and stepping into something much larger and fuller than ourselves. Sometimes our liturgies seem strange and jar us a bit, sometimes they aren't exactly to our liking or taste, but that's an important aspect of our education in love and worship in itself, reminding us that we are a community and not just individuals, and that worship isn't about *me* or my preferences at all, it's about God. And it also turns us outward into that life of offering, of gift, to which we are called as the people of the crucified and risen Christ. We are not just consumers here, looking for something for ourselves, to "get something out of" the sermon or the service. We are looking to gift ourselves over to this life together; gift ourselves to one another in love, and turn outward beyond ourselves in love of God and neighbor. Our call is to think much more along the lines of, "what can I offer," than "what can I get out of this."

This connection of love of God and love of neighbor, of becoming an offering to God and to one another, is central. There is no love of God without love of others. And this insoluble connection between love of God and neighbor; between worship of God and blessing of others, further points to the eternal reality of God the Trinity living as adoring, worshiping, self-gift. And if we're truly to worship, to hear, to follow, this God of self-giving love, if we are to share in that love, we too must become love overflowing.

Our liturgy, our communal worship in the gathered community, trains us up in this life of offering, this life of worship, and directs our love in the right direction. As we bring all that we are to the Eucharist and give ourselves away, joining with Christ's offering on the cross, and as we become one by sharing in the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17)—laying down our selfishness and narcissism for unity, equality, inclusion, and reconciliation, we're enabled to live this reconciliation, inclusion, equality, and unity in the whole of our lives beyond the walls of the church building. In that gathered space we learn who we are—we are becoming ourselves as Christ's body, so that we can live as our true selves everywhere else we go—loving God and loving neighbor, living lives that worship in the right direction.

Going to church, our act of liturgical, communal worship, is a sort of training ground. We are not just worshipping together we are also *learning* worship. This is one reason why both the shape and content of our corporate worship matters so much: how we worship together, how we pray, move, kneel, stand, eat and drink, preach and hear, make peace with one another and offer

our lives to God and each other shapes how we live when we leave the gathering. The Eucharist shapes eucharistic lives.

This being the case, if our communal acts of worship are most about personal “experience,” or most about taking or receiving rather than giving, most about honor of ourselves, or worse, the honor of the dynamic, charismatic leader up front, we have to ask ourselves—what are we being educated into? For what sort of life are we being trained? What sort of people are we practicing to become? Because it isn’t a question of *whether* our worship forms and shapes us into the kind of people, the kind of Church, that we are. It is a question of *what direction* our worship is forming and shaping us, because worship is always doing that work of forming and shaping.

The educative role of the liturgy and our communal worship is secondary, of course. God, not our own development, is the focus of worship. But in our lived experience these two things are impossible to separate. The shape and content of our worship is important because it reveals what we believe about God and leads us into ourselves. And this is true of all our worship—whether right worship of God or misplaced worship of other things. Our embodied, incarnational practices, our lived lives, are much more formative than just ideas and beliefs. And they are always shaping us.

If we aren’t going to church, if we are not giving ourselves over to God and others through communal worship, we should be wary of what direction our love and adoration, our life of worship is being shaped, and what we are missing, what aspects

of ourselves are being neglected, by isolating ourselves from the community for which we are made.

There are deep pastoral elements involved in this as well; deep elements of compassion and love for each other that can only be expressed as we show up for one another as a gathered people.

This became particularly evident during the period of COVID-19 when most Christians throughout the world could not gather as normal. While virtual services helped to keep people connected in new ways, and still do, many expressed grief at what has felt like abandonment or at least a spiritual dryness resulting from a type of worship that they were unable, either practically or spiritually, to participate in at all. Young people, both young adults and particularly children and youth, especially expressed this difficulty. Many parents of children and youth felt helpless to engage their kids with worship, prayer, and community. One child in my parish remarked, “I feel like I’ve left my faith behind.” Those in more comfortable home and living situations or who have connected well and been nourished in particular ways by virtual worship might think, “Why on earth would we gather together in person again? This is all going fine!” But for couples now going through a divorce after difficulty coping with the past high-stress years, teenagers and younger children experiencing such levels of social anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation, that they cannot return to school and their parents feel alone and helpless, elderly people who live alone and during a time of isolation learned how quickly “alone” can turn to “lonely,” and the list goes on, the gathering of the church community is a support system that is essential and life-sustaining (and none of these examples are hypothetical).

Beyond the sacramental necessity of gathering (being the *ekklesia*) there is also an essential pastoral and compassionate imperative to gather. We need each other, and we all have something to offer to one another in our need. If you do not go to church, if you don't show up, what love, support, and care is the community missing?

During the pandemic closures of church buildings, the maxim “the Church is not the building, it's the people,” became a go-to phrase for many, attaining frequently shared meme status. The conclusion some draw from the phrase, however, is that we can just be alone with Jesus or maybe just have some sort of connection with like-minded Christians but the larger, embodied reality of the Church as a whole with its spaces for gathering and distinct character in its worship, liturgy, and practice is really just unnecessary.

This understanding of the concept actually diminishes the significance of understanding the Church as a community of people. It supports the illusion that Christianity is an individualist faith—we can interpret it, express it, house and support it in whatever way we see fit as individuals in the 21st century because the rich traditions of faith and worship or the historic embodiment of the thing we call the Church doesn't really matter—all of that is just the facade and dressing.

But the real truth behind the understanding of the Church as the people and not the building is that it breaks us free from the individualism of our culture and places us in a new kind of community. It means that to belong to Christ is to belong to one another.

Most of you reading this I won't have met, but, in so far as we are members of the body of Christ, I belong to you—my spirituality, my sin, my struggles, my pain, my joy, belong to you, and yours to me. We carry them together. This is radical, and it leads to a radical equality that is simply not self-evident or expected, or maybe even desirable in a world that's history is explicit and vulgar with its display of inequality and oppression and class systems and discrimination. A community in which every person is seen as equally beloved of God and equally depends on one another, in which, as Galatians has it, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for . . . all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28), is a living protest in a society so bent on dividing and demeaning, rejecting and excluding.

And Christ's words, “wherever two or three are gathered, there I am also,” are not a transaction: “if you do your part and gather together, then I'll do my part and show up!” It's rather a declaration of the nature of the Church community—that to be with Christ and to be with one another are one and the same; to belong to Christ and to belong to one another are one and the same.

We go to church because we cannot fully live out who we are without gathering together, worshiping together, making Eucharist together, and meeting Christ in and with one another. We go to church because Christian spirituality is not an individualist, self-help program. It's a life of gift to God and to each other. A holy communion in which we belong to one another.

Questions for Reflection

1. Many people have grown accustomed to having a spirituality outside of community, or to attending church services virtually rather than in person. What might be missing in these situations?
2. If you do not go to church, what will the community be missing? What do you have to offer the community that would be lacking? And what do you need from others that you would miss if you didn't go?
3. What does it mean that we are most ourselves as the Church when we celebrate the Eucharist? How does the Eucharist make us who we are?

Being for Others

In the previous two chapters we began answering the question, “Why go to church?” by beginning with God and moving to the community of the Church as the body of Christ. We go to church because of who God is and because in our gathered worship we become who we truly are. In this chapter, I want to take a look at what this means for our lived experience. If we are never more ourselves as the Church than when we make Eucharist together, what does that mean for how we live our lives beyond the church walls?

Understanding worship as offering extends beyond our gathering together to all of life. In fact, the word *leitourgia*, or liturgy, means “service,” or “work of (or for) the people.” The word originally referred to public service and almsgiving, care for the poor and ethical, even political, action in the world. The liturgy involves the communal act of worship and prayer that is the source of all other activity and movement of the Church in service to others—particularly in the Eucharist, as we who receive the gift of the Eucharist become ourselves a eucharistic gift on offer for the life of the world.

But the liturgy only refers to our gathering for communal worship in so far as that worship is the source and spring of the whole Christian life; only in so far as “worship” means not just what we do as we gather for prayer, learning, singing, and so forth—though it certainly includes that—but the whole lived life

of the Church as an offering of love and service to God and to the world around us. We go to church, we go to worship “services” so that we can become the sent ones who leave the comfort of our church buildings to undertake the risk of loving service, becoming an offering to a hurting world. There is a reason that the closing words of the traditional Latin mass are, “*Ite, missa est*”: quite literally, “Go the dismissal is made.” Our communal worship is only true worship when it refuses to end there. There is a sense in which the ultimate liturgical act is to walk out of the church and continue to give ourselves away in love.

Worship is the entire Christian life, our entire relation to and response to God. It is the gift of our whole selves. But our shared identity through gathered prayer and liturgical practice (what we typically mean when using the word “worship”) cannot be divorced from this holistic reality. It works to both represent and to sustain and create this holistic vision of our life with one another and before God. It gives us a certain posture, a relation toward God, and opens up our humanity to our ultimate end and fullness. And this worshiping posture is that posture of offering, or self-gift.

If our worship is purely intellectual, in our heads, or revolves around rationalist “messages”—primarily absorbing information or trying to live a disembodied spirituality, it runs the risk of convincing us that God is a God who is not so present in our lived reality, in the stuff of our life and world, but is a distant figure somewhere heavenly beyond. Embodied worship in which we touch, taste, smell, hear, and move reveals God among us in our everyday reality, and trains us up to be with God in all our

mundane motions and to recognize God among us in the motions of others. The God who feeds you at the altar is the God who feeds the hungry. The God who meets you in water and wine, in oil and touch, is the God who meets you in the streets and in the workplace, the God who is at home in all creation. And worship of God can then be as simple as making a home there, too. Worship is, in essence, being at home with God in the world.

Our shared life of communal worship that trains us and educates us into that posture of self-gift is an act of protest to our culture of production and consumption. In our society we are shaped and formed from childhood to take, to be consumers, to get ahead at all costs. We are taught that producing more and consuming more is inherently good for us, and we pursue the life we want to live accordingly. The re-education we receive in the Christian community through our life and worship together creates a new kind of society. Worship cannot be treated like another product or utility in our endless cycle of consumerism. God's economy works differently than ours. And entering into this economy of grace through the offering of our worship, the "sacrifice of praise," is to live in conscious critique of our consumer culture.

But in this giving ourselves away, in the act of self-gift and offering, we are paradoxically, at last, truly filled. The offering of the work of human hands returns to us as the bread of life. The offering of the fruit of the vine returns to us as the cup of salvation. Our gathered worship creates a different kind of society centered upon an economy of grace and gift.

This makes worship—this great act of self-giving—a life not only of offering to God and one another but a gift to the world. Because worship turns us outward beyond ourselves, because it is an act of de-centering the self and opening us up to God and others, it is transformative for the world around us and is our true vocation and calling in life. It's the worship of the self, self-idolatry, that creates and resources the breakdown of human flourishing and peace. And because true worship de-thrones us, it creates a new society of equity and justice. Not a perfect society! But one in which we are most ourselves in giving ourselves away; one in which we are most at home with ourselves when we are at home with God and others.

We began our answer to the question, “Why go to church?” by saying the aim and purpose of our lives is sharing in God's life. And we are fulfilled, made ourselves through worship precisely because we are not seeking to fill ourselves up but to give ourselves away. For there is no point in which we are closer to that aim and purpose, in which we are closer to our fullness, in which we are more like God, than when our lives become offerings of self-giving love.

The shape of our communal worship (and even our church buildings), particularly our eucharistic liturgy draws us into this reality. Most churches have a baptismal font near the entrance (typically the west end of the building), so that every time we enter the church, we are reminded that we enter this community, the body of Christ, by passing through the waters of baptism. So we enter the building each time by way of the font. People often dip their finger into the water and make the sign of the cross with it as a reminder that we enter the Church and approach the

Eucharist by way of these waters. We also exit the building by passing through these waters again, a reminder that we are sent out into the world, beyond the doors of the church, to live the promises of our baptism to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, and to pursue justice and peace, respecting the dignity of every human person.

We then begin the liturgy with the processional. Typically following the cross and/or the book of the gospels, often with candles and incense as well, moving to the front of the church toward the altar at the east end. The altar is at the east end of the church as a sign of the resurrection. The sun rises in the east, and as each Eucharist is a participation in Christ's resurrection life, a "mini Easter," this symbolises the new morning of Christ resurrection. The procession toward this new life is a reminder that our whole life on earth is a pilgrimage in and toward the love of God in Christ. We are moving toward the fullness of resurrection as we move toward the altar of salvation, where we receive a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

The first words of the liturgy invoke the name of the Trinity, at which we make the sign of the cross, reminding us that this pilgrimage of life is a welcoming into the triune life and love of God by way of the cross of Jesus. We are "wrapped up" in God's love through Christ's cross, which marks the boundaries of our being as we trace the cross across our bodies. We then join in the song of the angels in the *Gloria* as we sing, "Glory to God in the highest," recalling Christ's birth, the joy of God-with-us in the incarnation. The priest then prays the collect, a prayer that gathers up the prayers of all the people in line with the readings or theme of the day.

The liturgy of the word, or ministry of the word, follows with readings from the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, the psalms, a New Testament book other than the gospels, and then the Gospel reading. Often the Gospel is read from among the people with a procession coming out into the congregation with the gospel book—a reminder that Jesus comes among us, and that as the Gospel is proclaimed it makes its home in this community of faith as we hear and embody it. The sermon is then preached, which seeks to instruct, encourage, and take people deeper into the truth of the scriptures that have just been read.

Following the sermon, we confess our faith together in the words of the Nicene Creed (which is actually from the Council of Constantinople in 381, rather than Nicaea in 325, but it finds its roots in Nicaea!). The prayers of the people and confession of our sins then follows, if the confession wasn't already done near the beginning of the liturgy. The confession coming before the Peace is significant, we make things right with God and one another, repenting of the ways in which we have not loved God and each other fully, before we approach each other in peace and approach Christ in the sacrament. We're acknowledging that we need grace in and with one another, and that to belong to Christ and to belong to one another are one and the same. The Offertory is next, when the fruits of the earth and the work of human hands in bread and wine are brought to the altar and offered up, set apart to become the space where God makes God's home with us in the world. The offering of our financial gifts is also taken at this time, so that we offer all that we have and all that we are and even change the ways that we live by

generously gifting our resources for the good of the community and in service to others.

We have to take note that everything we are doing in our liturgy is necessarily and inherently communal. We must be with one another, gathered as the community of Christ crucified and risen, in order to fully live into the reality of our worship. Each move, every turn, every time we stand or kneel or speak or listen, each motion we take is an opening up to God and to one another, an act of gift in which we offer our whole selves to God and one another for the flourishing of the community and the life of the world. And this continues in the climax of the liturgy in the consecration of the mundane stuff of our world in bread and wine and the welcoming of Christ's sacramental presence among us. We go to church because none of this is fully possible without the gathered community.

There are endless things that could be said about this, but the most important aspect to focus on for our purposes here is what's often called the fourfold shape of the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we take, bless, break, and give the bread of life, and this shape also becomes the shape of our lives as Christ's body in the world.

At the last supper with his disciples, Jesus initiated this fourfold shape when he took, blessed, broke, and distributed bread to them, offering himself to them in the mundane stuff of our world and telling his followers to continue this practice of communally gathering for a ritual meal, where he always meets us at the table. And this taking, blessing, breaking, and giving becomes not only the shape of our holy meal, but the shape of holy lives. We take,

bless, break, and give in the Eucharist, and we are taken, blessed, broken, and given as a eucharistic people.

The first action—taking—reminds us that all eucharistic life is God’s life first, as all of life is, and this eucharistic life is a result of God’s gift. God is the creator and giver of all life, and further, in God’s great initiative we are “taken” up into God’s life and love when God assumes humanity to Godself in the incarnation. We are united to God in Christ as our human nature is taken into union with God’s life. And through the incarnation, this “taking up” of human nature in Christ, God renews what it is to be a human being, the life we’re called into through the grace of our baptism. In the Eucharist, when we take the bread of life, we are taking up the life we’re called to live, a life gifted to us by Christ’s presence with us as the one who lived that life for and among us. This gift was lived in real life with real people in Jesus, and as we partake of it, we too gather up our real lives, and all of creation—our faults and frailties, our weakness and struggle, our sorrow and pain, our joy and wonder—and in response to God’s gift, offer it all as a gift in return, united to Christ’s offering of himself. So that we take by receiving the gift of God’s love, and we are taken, as we offer ourselves in love to God and others.

The second action is blessing. This eucharistic shape of life that we’re called to is impossible on our own, but it is blessed, and we are nourished and sent to live it united to Christ’s life, the one who perfectly live the life to which we’re called. We become a blessing to the world around us by being united to Christ, the blessed one. So, just as we take and are taken in the Eucharist, we are blessed and become a blessing.

But to truly live the eucharistic life, we must be broken as well as blessed. This is the third action of the Eucharist-shaped life of the Church. In Jesus' offering, in which we share, the wounds of the world are offered up to God's endless mercy in the wounds of Christ. Christ's body, broken and restored, is the agonies of our world received into the very life of God. And as we break the bread and become one body, Christ's body, we too become the broken and restored, the crucified and risen, for the life of the world. As Christ touches the wounds of the world in his own breaking, so we as Christ's body are never far from the world's wounds. To be united to Christ's offering in the Eucharist, united to his body broken, is to be broken open ourselves in love for the world, and to be placed on offer ourselves for the world's brokenness.

This broken body, the crucified body of Jesus, is then given as gift. Jesus' offering isn't just to be broken, but to be given. We hold out our hands to receive the God of our salvation who is given to and for us in Christ, and who is offered for our renewal, gifted to us in the bread of life. But this eucharistic shape, remember, is also the shape of our lives. So that, we too are given as gifts. By uniting our sacrifice, our offering, to Christ's, the gift of Christ's life, death, and resurrection become the everyday reality of our faith and living. As a eucharistic people, living this eucharistic shape of our community, Christ is the sustenance of our lives, and the gift we have to offer others.

To follow Jesus is to go where Jesus goes, and this eucharistic life of the Church takes us there. We go to church, we gather as a eucharistic people, in order to truly become followers of Jesus. To become disciples, friends of Christ who follow the eucharistic

shape of the Christian life. A shape that requires us to gather as a eucharistic people—to take, bless, break, and give Christ and ourselves for the life of the world.

We go to church not only to be with God and be with others, but to be *for* others, to be taken, blessed, broken, and given, so as to truly go where Jesus goes and, by the gift of the Spirit, live as he lives. And when we look at where Jesus goes, we find him with the suffering, the impoverished, the hurting, and the rejected. A truly eucharistic people, a people who are true disciples, will find ourselves among these as well.

The perfect offering of love in Christ's cross and resurrection is a particular act in a particular person in a particular time and place, but it is also at once the infinite, never ending offering of the very life of God, a life that has no boundaries. And that boundless love of God continues to take shape in this particular, time-bound world in our eucharistic worship and further in the eucharistic gift of Christ's body, the Church—taken, blessed, broken, and given to the world in love.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does our communal worship, understood as “offering,” transform our lives and how we love others in the world?
2. How does the shape of the Eucharist shape our lives for the good of others? Which of these four aspects: taking, blessing, breaking, and giving, resonates most deeply with you as formative for Christian living?
3. How would you communicate to someone who asks you why going to church matters to those beyond its walls? How does communal worship change the world around us?

