

“Why Do You Come to Church?”

Good Shepherd, Canandaigua

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Psalm 102:18

Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord: 19 “The Lord looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he viewed the earth, 20 to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death.” 21 So the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem 22 when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the Lord.”

So, I understand that you are coming to the close of a major funding campaign. What is it you are raising? \$550,000. Wow! That is a lofty goal. It is so lofty that Pastor Don called in the big gun. He called on me to seal the deal. Well, in my little delusional world, I can think that. First, neither Pastor Don nor this church's leadership nor God need Deknatel to seal the deal. Pastor Don and the church leadership are doing quite well, thank you very much, and every now and then, even I have to admit that God actually knows what He is doing. Can I hear an, Amen to that! Actually, Pastor Don asked me to preach on a pretty simple topic. (See he only gives me the easy stuff. After all, I am retired). He wanted me to preach on the topic, *“Why Do You Come to Church?”* So, let's answer that. Why DO you come to Church?

I know, I know, for this Sunday, you came to church just to hear me preach. Is that not right? And before you answer that, remember that I have a very fragile ego. I sure hope you don't come to church for that. But, truth be told, you may come to church because Pastor Don is the pastor, because he has been a faithful and loving pastor for, what, 75 years now? Author Thom Rainer, in his book, *“Surprising Insights from the Unchurched”* asked the unchurched why they chose a particular church and, would you believe it, 90% said it was because of the pastor or the preaching. Oh what power we pastor's have. So, some of you might come to church because of the pastor or the preaching.

But, this only tells a small part of the story. I would dare say that some of you come to church because yo' mama made you when you were a kid and that habit continues. Here is the mantra we recited to our son; “As long as you live under our roof, you will go to church.” Any of you have your mama say that to you? Any of you say that to your kids? And, this is not a bad thing. Scripture says, *“Train up a child in the way he or she will go and when they are old, they will not depart from that.”* So, don't discount yo' mama. Never discount yo' mama. Habit may be an important reason you come to church.

Along with that is guilt. Jewish mothers are not the only ones who can lay on the guilt. Italian mothers are good at guilt and so are German mothers and Swedish mothers and you fill in the blank mothers. We certainly wanted to establish a good habit with our son but we would admit that there was also some guilt in there, that if he didn't come to church, he would have to deal with a healthy dose of guilt. To not have that guilt could be a reason for you to come to church.

Another reason is friendships. Actually, this is a huge reason for people to come to church. In churchy terms, Good Shepherd is considered a small to medium size church and churches of those sizes place a high value on friendships. They are, to a great degree, social organisms. The people in those churches consider themselves one big happy family. You might come to church to be a part of the family.

You might come to church because of the pastor or the preaching, or because of habit, or because you don't want to deal with the guilt you feel if you don't come, or to be with your friends. Those might be reasons you come to church. But, could I go deeper? Can you hear you say, "Go deeper, Deknatel! Go deeper!" Alright, just because you asked, let me give you some deep reasons to come to church, some deep points that I want to make. Here is my first major point. (I know you are saying, "This guy has been preaching for five minutes already and he is JUST getting to his first major point? And, I would say, "That's right. It is my first point of 15 points so hunker down). Here is my first major point—seriously the first of only 3;

I. You Come to Church in Order to Get

A. What do you get?

1. You come to church to get the Word preached and applied to your life.

You come to get the Word that is powerful, that promises not to return void, the Word that is, to quote Paul in 2 Timothy 3, "*God-inspired and profitable for teaching, reproof and correction so that the person of God is fully equipped for every good work.*" You come to church to get that Word.

2. You come to church to get forgiveness of sins.

You confess those sins and your pastor announces the forgiveness that Jesus accomplished on the cross. You get forgiveness of sins. What else?

3. You come to church to get baptism.

That is the beginning of faith and you get that at church. And,

4. You come to church to get communion.

You actually get to partake of Christ's Body and Christ's blood, assuring you of forgiveness and His presence and eternal life.

Don't minimize this point. Don't think that you are being selfish when you come to church to get. You are only getting the wonderful blessings that God wants to bestow on you. He wants you to have these things. He wants you to get these things as you come to church. The opposite is also true. If you don't come to church, you don't get some of those things. So, be bold and come to church in order to get. Now, I want to tell you that as wonderful as those gifts are,

B. There is a danger here.

There is a danger if the only reasons you come to church are to catch up with friends or because it is a habit or because you feel guilty if you don't come. There is also a danger if the only reason you are come to church is to get. In order to explain this, I need to tell you two parables. The first is

1. The parable of the Dead Sea

When we were in Israel, we got to visit the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea has a very high salt content, so high that the water is very dense and when you dive into the water, you float to the top like a cork. You go into the water and you sit back, you just plop down in the water and you bob like a cork. You can't go under water. You float on top. Now, the reason we were given for the high salt content was that the Dead Sea had the Jordan River flow into it, but nothing flowed out. It had inflow but no outflow. Everything came in but nothing flowed out. The result of that—listen to this parable—the result of that was that nothing lived in the Dead Sea. No fish, no shrimp, no crab—I'm from Maryland and not to have crabs, Maryland Blue crabs, is a travesty—nothing lived in the Dead Sea. And, if you compared a picture of the Dead Sea when we were there 24 years ago, with a picture today, you would see that the Dead Sea is actually shrinking. There are various reasons for that but where we went in to the Dead Sea is now just rocky ground for the Dead Sea is going away. Not only is nothing alive in it but the sea as a water body is dying, too. My point is that if we come to church just to get, if all we have is inflow and we don't have any outflow, our faith can shrivel up as well. Here is the second parable. This is

2. The parable of the football team

I heard this a couple of weeks ago from Pastor Kirk Duker of Hope Lutheran Church in Greece. Pastor Duker described a football team getting into a huddle and coming up with a really fantastic play. I mean this was a never fail play. This is Bills quarterback Josh Allen calling the play, "Stefan Diggs, you run a post pattern behind the safeties and I will hit you with the pass." So, Josh calls the play and the players are readied, but, what would happen if, instead of hiking the ball, the entire offensive team goes to the sidelines and never runs the play. A little later on, the team gathers on the field again, comes up with another never fail play, calls the play and then runs to the sidelines and never runs the play. So, you can come to church and get God's rich blessings that are geared for you to run a play for God and you can hear about the play God wants you to run but instead of executing the play you just sit on the sidelines. You don't run the play. These two parables lead me to my second major deep point in answering the question; Why do you come to church? And that is

II. You Come to Church in Order to Go

A. This is the reverse of the Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea was dead because it had stuff flowing in but none flowing out. It had inflow but no outflow. This is the culmination of the parable of the football team. This is not just about the Bills conceiving of and calling a great play but of actually running that play, of putting it into action. "Josh throws to Diggs, he's got it on the 30, the 25 he-may-go-all-the-way. Touchdown! This is putting all of the stuff that you come to church to get, this is putting that into action. It is

using it for God's Kingdom. Whereas just coming to church to get can become all about me, coming to church to go is about others. It is about seeking to save the lost. It is about coming and getting all of those wonderful gifts, getting filled full of Jesus, in order to go. You come to church in order to go. It is about taking the mission out into the marketplace. It is about being a servant.

B. The Scripture for today

That is where the Scripture I chose for today comes in to play. Let me read it to you;

“Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the Lord: ¹⁹ “The Lord looked down from his sanctuary on high, from heaven he viewed the earth, ²⁰ to hear the groans of the prisoners and release those condemned to death.” ²¹ So the name of the Lord will be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem ²² when the peoples and the kingdoms assemble to worship the Lord.”

The psalmist says,

“Let this be written...”

What is the “this”? The “this” is that God looked down from His sanctuary on high, He looked down on sinful human beings, those who were prisoners to sin, those who were condemned to death, the wages of sin is death, eternal death, God heard the groans of sin, the groans of sinners and He acted in sending Jesus to die for a lost and condemned world. The psalmist says, *“Let this be written—(listen now)--let this be written for a **future generation**, that a people **not yet created** may praise the Lord.”*

This is not let's just let the Gospel to be preached to just those sitting in the pew, to those already saved, to just the members of Good Shepherd. Again, let me be clear, the Gospel WAS written for you sitting here today. Coming to church to get that Gospel is so, so very important. But, you get the Gospel, you get all of those wonderful blessings in order to go and share those blessings with those not sitting in these pews, with those not yet saved, with those who are not members of Good Shepherd with those outside of this church. *“Let this be written for a **future generation**, that a people **not yet created** may praise the Lord.”* Do you hear this just wreaking of mission? Do you hear this just oozing with servanthood? Do you hear it flowing out from all of the gifts we have received from God when we come to church. Say this with me, “You come to church to get so that you can go.”

A. That was Jesus' mission

Jesus said that He came so that sinners can have life and have it abundantly. John's gospel describes it with the words, *“God so loved that He gave His one and only Son...”* In Philipppians, Paul described Jesus' attitude with these words;

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being

made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Philippians 2:6-8

This is all about the God of the universe stooping down to be a servant. Jesus’ mission was directed at those not yet members of His Kingdom, those not yet part of the Church, those who are sinners. It is directed at a future generation, a generation not yet created. That was Jesus’ mission. And this is about

B. Jesus’ mission then becomes the church’s mission

Paul tells us to let Jesus’ servant attitude become the church’s servant attitude. Paul says, “Your attitude should be the same as Christ Jesus.” Jesus mission becomes the church’s mission. Jesus gave a concise statement of the mission of the church, he said,

*“... **go** and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”*
Matthew 28:18-20

What was the first word? Go. The mission of the church is not to sit and wait. It is to go. You come to church to get in order to go.

There is this incident in the Bible that happened 40 days after Easter. Jesus was right ready to ascend into heaven. He gathered His disciples together and He said;

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you (the disciples. Gathered there as well as every single disciple thereafter) you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Acts 1:8

Right after that, Jesus was taken up to heaven. The disciples were watching Him ascend. They were watching Him go up, up, up. I always have this picture in my mind’s eye that they were standing there with their mouths wide open, watching Jesus go, when two men dressed in white stood next to them and said, “Yo, hoodles, why are you standing there with your mouths wide open catching flies when you have work to do. You need to be witnesses for Jesus throughout the world. The disciples got to go to church with Jesus for 3 years, they had all of this infow from Jesus, and now it was time for them to go, to go out into the world.

The whole book of Acts is about the church going. Paul’s entire ministry was about going. Paul even said that he had become all things to all people in order to save some. Paul went from town to town, from people group to people group to save some. Paul was about going. Jesus set up His church to be the agent of salvation for a lost world. He gave the Church the task of going to make disciples of all nations. It is when the church only comes to get and not to go, it is when the church gives in to the thinking that it exists for itself, it is when the whims and desires of the members becomes paramount, it is when the Church stops going, when it ceases to be a servant, it is then that the Church is in trouble--I will say it this strongly--it is then that the Church ceases to be the Church. *“Let this be written for a future generation...”* Let the work of the church, the mission of the church, be about reaching those beyond the church. Let the Church go. We come

to church in order to go. We come to get the Word and to get forgiveness and to get baptism and to get Holy Communion, we come to church to get all of these wonderful blessings from God, we get them not so that we become like the Dead Sea where we have inflow but no outflow, where we just take it in and nothing goes out. No, we come in order to go. Say that with me; We come in order to go. This is about discipleship. It is about obedience. It is about servanthood. It is about love for sinners, concern for your neighbor's and friend's eternal welfare. This is about the Church coming in order to go.

C. Where does this campaign fit in?

This has a lot to do with this campaign you all are involved in. As I understand it,

1. You are raising money for the pastoral transition.

You could think that the campaign will raise money to give pastor Don and your next pastor a good salary. You could think of it that way. (You could also throw in a few grand for Deknatel's retirement fund, too while you are at it). Or—listen to this shift in thinking, you could see this pastoral staff as those who will equip this church to come here and get filled up in order to go.

2. I understand that a portion of the money raised in this campaign is to renovate the sanctuary.

You could see that as just meeting the needs of the current members, of making the sanctuary comfortable for the already saved. Or, you could make the shift that you are going to renovate this sanctuary in order to make it more appealing to those walking in the front door for the very first time. You could see this renovation as the church coming here in order to go.

3. I understand that a portion of the funds raised will go to building a Habitat for Humanity house.

That, in itself, is moving your congregation to go. But, could I suggest even another way to see that. You could see the construction of this house as an opportunity to go, as an opportunity to not just provide for the needs of housing for a family but as an opportunity to share the Gospel with them. This campaign is an opportunity for Good Shepherd to come in order to go. And, that brings me to my third and final major point;

I. You Come to Church to Give

This is a huge shift. I can't emphasize enough how large of a shift this really is.

A. If we only come to church to get, then our attendance becomes all about me.

It becomes about what I need and what I want and what my preferences are. That's when the people start holding up score cards. How was the sermon today? Deknatel was preaching. I gave it a 7.5. The week before Pastor Don preached and he was a little off so I gave it a 9.7

rather than his usual 9.99. I prefer the sermons to be a little shorter, a little longer (right, who wishes for that) with more stories, with fewer stories, fire and brimstone preaching or just a conversational style. Or how about the music. The music was too loud or too soft or too unfamiliar. The music was too Lutheran or too Baptist or too emotional or too dry and boring. This is where worship wars are fought. I only like organ music. I like contemporary music but don't play those drums in church. Really, I like drums. It could be worse. It could be country and western hymns. That is just not right. First country western and music is a contradiction in terms and what self-respecting Lutheran would ever admit to listening to country western music. Don't tell me some of you listen to that. C'mon, let's see a show of hands. Oh my, we will pray for you.

So, the huge shift is away from the what I want and what I need and what my preferences are

B. The shift is to what I can give.

And, what can you give?

1. You can give worship and praise to a wonderful, grace-filled God

to a God over flowing with unconditional and unrelenting love for you. Why the definition of worship is worth-ship, that God is worthy of our praise. You come to church to give Him worship and praise for Him giving His all for you. Just as an aside—you don't have to pay for this extra point, how would our worship change if we came to church to not just get but to give? How would the singing change, the fervor of the singing, the volume, the direction of the singing if it was directed at God, if it was directed at Jesus? And, of course,

2. When you come in order to give, you think of money

And rightly so because when you give of your money, that is an act of worship and praise. That is why churches receive the offering within the worship service. You have received the wonderful gift God has given you and you want to give back to Him.

Why do you come to church? You may come to church because of the pastor or because of habit or because of guilt or because of your friends. But, when you look deeper, you come to church in order to get. You get in order to go. And, you come to church to give, to give Him worship and praise. So, after all of that preaching, let me ask you, why DO you come to church?

In Jesus' name.
Amen.