

**“Why Do We Stay in the Church?
To Embrace Our Calling to Practice Christian effervescence.”**

Texts: Hebrew 10:19-25
Acts 2:43-47

“Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”

~ Acts 2:46-47

Prayer
Holy God,
May the words of my mouth
And this sacred time of intentional listening to your Word
Bring us close to you and one another,
So that we may be a church that praises and worships you
With body, soul, mind and strength. Amen.

During this Lenten season, our congregation has been invited to take part in a simple spiritual discipline. Every Monday night, a video of a poem and a prayer shared by one of our church members is posted on our Facebook Page and published to our YouTube channel. Each video beckons us to a sacred time of meditation. The poems make our hearts ready for the reality of the world that still crucifies life, our souls ready for deep transformation and our minds ready for the mystery of resurrection. And every prayer exposes the broken and dead things in our world and in our lives to God’s life-giving grace. I hope you all are making a habit of watching these very short videos in a spirit of prayer and worship. As we go through Lent, these intentional weekly pauses for reflection are meant to take you into a deep spiritual time in God’s Presence where you can be honest about your inner restlessness, your personal struggles, your spiritual yearnings and about your desire for wholeness and for new life.

And spiritual honesty is exactly what the poem Barbara Skaggs read two weeks ago calls on the church to practice during Lent. Bearing the name of the liturgical season, the poem by Jean M. Watt describes the season of Lent as a **“tree without blossom, without leaf... all unadorned.”** Lent, the poet writes:

***“Unlike Christmas which decrees
The setting-up, the dressing of trees...
is a taking down, a stripping bare,
A starkness after all that has been withdrawn
Of surplus and superfluous,
Leaving no hiding place, only an emptiness
Between black branches, a most precious space***

***Before the leaf, before the time of flowers;
Lest we should see only the leaf, the flower,
Lest we should miss the stars.”ⁱ***

The Lenten sermon series this year has been very deliberately an exercise in creating a most precious space for us to ask ourselves why we stay involved in, connected to, and affiliated with the Church. My sermons have left no hiding places untouched, and I know that some of you have privately objected to the starkness of my preaching. To name the brokenness of the Church from the pulpit at such tender moment when congregations are anxiously trying to convince people to return to the pews sounds like an unwise taking down. It is very human to want to hear stories that make us feel safe, unruffled, and reassured. This may well be the reason why so many Christians think of the Church as a retreat from the world, a momentary escape from the struggles of daily life where people gather to re-center, recharge, and listen to a hopeful word from the pulpit that can inspire them to be kind, nice and ethical human beings until they meet again. We all like a language of faith that points to the leaves and flowers on the tree of life.

Author Brian McLaren, who has been our companion on this year’s Lenten journey, says that it is not uncommon for Christians to practice “**confirmation bias**.”ⁱⁱ What McLaren means is that most of us come to church not expecting to have our minds and hearts changed, not hoping for a moment of eye-opening spiritual awakening, not seeking to have our desires completely re-shaped by God’s compassionate love, but to confirm what we already believe. In his Letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul encouraged them not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of their minds, so that they might discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.ⁱⁱⁱ Well, that’s easier said than done. In one of the churches I served, there was a lovely woman in her 70’s who used to tell me that she wanted to hear sermons that rattled her brain, but the majority of Christians gravitate toward a language of faith and religious practices that fit snugly into their belief system, their life trajectory, their preferred way of looking at the world and into biblical interpretations that they already accept as being true. Everything else, anything new is often dismissed, resented, rejected and canceled out. McLaren laments that the Church of his youth did not encourage him to question his biases, challenge untested assumptions, be curious rather than afraid of the truth, and cultivate the beginner’s mind and spirituality of a true born-again Christian.^{iv} Poet W.H. Auden was onto something real about us when he wrote, “***We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the present and let our illusions die.***”^v

The truth is that no one looks for what is beyond the leaves and flowers willingly or voluntarily. Our long-held assumptions, our beliefs, our values, our prejudices, and our way of life are too reassuring to make us look up and see that there is something further, wider, bigger, something more than our personal, cultural and religious biases. This is why we need the stripping-bare of Lent. Without this undressing of our carefully constructed world of beliefs, convictions, loyalties, attachments, half-truths and desires, our hearts and minds

remain safely and happily ensconced in the inner sanctum of a small and constricted space of our own making. We never notice the broader horizon. We don't marvel at the spacious sky. We miss and, therefore, never develop the spiritual muscles to reach for the stars. We close ourselves to the guidance and wisdom of the Holy Spirit; the only power that can break our hearts open to repentance, a new direction, a change of mind, and a new way of seeing what matters and what is real.

For many people who have left the Church, this Sunday morning practice of gathering to worship during Lent or, for that matter on any other Sunday of the year, looks like a massive waste of time, energy, and resources. And there is good reason for this skepticism about church services. This is how Brian McLaren helps us, who cannot imagine Sundays without a worship service, see beyond our wall of bias. Imagine if space aliens visited the earth to conduct a social study and asked, “***What has been the effect of the largest, wealthiest, most powerful and most influential religion on the planet on global well-being?***” These alien social scientists might be surprised to find out that there are Christians who say that angels, demons, and heaven are real, but climate change, racism, COVID, inequality and transphobia are not.^{vi} The outer space visitors might be confused about the mindset of people who turned the Church, which is rooted in the non-conforming message of the Gospels, into “***an agency of continuity rather than change, conformity rather than transformation.***”^{vii} These extraterrestrial scholars would certainly notice that the way of life most Christians defend, protect and promote is quite often diametrically opposed to the teachings of Jesus. We tend to talk about Christianity as we wish it were instead of how it has been lived out by Christians in the Church; and, while it may not be realistic to expect the ugly features of our humanity not to manifest themselves in the institutional Church – after all, as Church historian Kate Bowler puts it in her book, “***There is no cure for being human.***”^{viii} – the outside world still hopes that we will live the words of Jesus Christ into reality. And it is understandable why people who do not go to church services wonder if all this time Christians spend in worship every year – listening to Jesus’ teachings, singing Jesus’s words, praying Jesus’ prayer and talking about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection – gives them a reason to admire the Church or a reason to see us as an example of the failure of Christianity to transform human hearts.

From the earliest days of the Church, this habit of gathering on the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection, the day Christians remember the promise of a new life and a new world has been the most central and distinctive spiritual practice of the Christian religion. For us, worship is a time that stands out from the ordinary flow of life. It is the source of the congregation’s life together. It is a sacred time when the Holy Spirit breaks our hearts open to God and to the stories of faith that nurture in us a deep knowing of who and whose we are. Even during a period of intense persecution by Emperor Nero, the writer of Hebrews, a book that scholars agree was written as a sermon to a church under immense pressure, instructed his congregation not to give up the habit of meeting together for worship. Whether it happens in house-churches, caves, under tree branches, small country churches, gothic cathedrals or on Facebook, gathering for public worship has been the most important religious event in the life of individual Christians for almost 2,000 years.

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

And we gather regularly with each other for worship not only to congeal our hearts and minds into a living worshipping community, but, as the preacher to the Hebrews said, “**to provoke one another to love and good deeds.**”

Our weekly gatherings demand something of us. The Greek expression translated as “*provoke*” in our Bible offers a much more graphic image of what the writer of Hebrews had in mind. The idea behind the writer’s words is a kind of provocation that literally cuts another person making it impossible for someone not to respond and do something. In other words, worship is a call for action. It must draw a real response to Christ’s self-giving and life-saving love out of us. Franciscan priest Richard Rohr laments that Christian services have been turned into soft rituals for belief management, ego consolation and self-improvement when our Sunday gatherings ought to be reminding us that there is something more, a further journey.^{ix} Our services are supposed to help us see that there is a way of life that provokes us to practice moral beauty, to be possibility thinkers, “**to see the inner meaning of outer things,**” to ask ourselves if there’s something more to life than our own little “**private salvation projects,**”^x something more than our biases, something more disconcerting, exciting and transformative than everything we already know.

Paraphrasing Jesus’ words in John 8:32, Fr. Rohr said that “[before] **the truth ‘sets [us] free,’ it tends to make [us] miserable.**”^{xi} The worship service is a place where we are asked to say a sacred “no” to our biases and to ourselves, which is never easy, so the Holy Spirit can give us a new identity and a new vocation to love our neighbors, our planet and our God. This transformation does not come by effortlessly. We have to be willing to let the truth, the love, the faith, the Way of Jesus we proclaim during our services change us from the inside out. And no one can do it alone. No one can be a Christian alone disconnected from the worshipping community.

The early followers of Christ understood the power of connection through worship. The Book of Acts describes the early Church as a community of Christians that despite their flaws, and they had many, “**devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers**”^{xii} ... **Day by day... they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God.**” And each time they were together, the Spirit gave them new lenses through which to look at themselves and the world. They broke out of the constraints of what the world told them was possible, shared their possessions and created an egalitarian faith community. The Church of Acts became conspicuous by the way they allowed the Gospel to show them what is far above the leaves and flowers. And the quality of their life together surprised the world around them. In their gatherings, the Christians in Jerusalem were provoked to love each other, and they learned to love the people outside the faith community as well. They became an awe-inspiring church. People began to pay attention to the way they gathered and worshipped and how they brought moral beauty into human history. Loving God, humankind, and creation became a practice, a habit, a choice, a vocation for those first followers of Christ. And when they gathered, I

like to believe that even though they were constantly pushed out of their comfort zone and challenged to look up and see the stars, there was a palpable effervescence in their worship service. They were ecstatic about being together. They loved being part of a community that embodied Christ's teachings in real life and in real time. Their gathering, their breaking of bread, their praying, and their rituals set them free from their confirmation bias and opened their lives to the Holy Spirit and that humble gathering of effervescent followers of Christ provoked millions of people around the world down through the centuries to keep trying to look for something more and make loving God and neighbor their life-long vocation.

There is a story that comes from the Sufi tradition, which I find inspiring. One day, God said to Hafiz, the mystic poet from the fourteenth century that was known as the "Tongue of the Invisible," ***"You promised me that if I showed you where I live, you wouldn't tell anybody. And look what you have done! You gave the whole world my address! You told humankind about love."***

Friends, I hope you stay in the Church because you want something more. You want to break free from your confirmation bias, to go further on the journey of faith, to see the stars, to be transformed, to feel the effervescence of the Spirit in your heart when you gather to worship and to share God's address with the whole world outside this building.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ By Jean M. Watt in Lent, read by Barbara Skaggs and shared on video as part of our 2023 Lenten Discipline – A Poem and A Prayer.

ⁱⁱ Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 67 [Kindle Edition].

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 12:2.

^{iv} Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 68, adapted [Kindle Edition].

^v Quoted by Richard Rohr in Falling Upward, p. 65 [Kindle Edition].

^{vi} Brian D. McLaren in Do I Stay Christian?, p. 178, adapted [Kindle Edition].

^{vii} Peter J. Gomes in The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus, p. 20.

^{viii} Kate Bowler in No Cure for Being Human, p. 187 [Kindle Edition].

^{ix} Richard Rohr in Falling Upward, locations 369 and p. 65 [Kindle Edition].

^x *Ibid.*, p. 20.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 73.

^{xii} Acts 2:42.