*Stop Going to Church!*

Hebrews 10:24-25, Luke 17-20-21

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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I don’t know if I have told you this enough lately but I love this church! As I tell people all the time, this is the church I looked for my whole life. You are rooted in your tradition and at the same time you are able to change and adapt to the needs of the world and your community from your very rootedness. You know how to open your arms and envelope people. You have a prophetic bent and a willingness to speak a needed voice into the world. You understand the need for the Arts -- creating it, noticing it, and celebrating it. Service is at your core, so much so that you always feel like you have not done enough. In a world that seems hell bent on war…a world in which oppression is commonplace… you advocate for another way of living. You respect your children and your youth, not relegating them to the church of the future but embracing them as part of the church of the present.

With all that is right about this community of faith, you would think that our pews would be overflowing with people. However, more and more people are voting against church by justnot showing up anymore. In 2021, 28% of Americans reported that they attend church at least once a month. That figure devastates me. I have given my vocational life…my blood, sweat and tears….because I believe in church. I am terrified…that may sound overly dramatic but it is accurate…I am terrified of what happens when and if church becomes obsolete.

Church offers something significant…something we don’t find other places. I want to give you six examples of what makes church unique.

1. It is intergenerational. There are very few places left where people of all ages come together to form community.
2. Church allows us to interact and network across diverse lines. We aren’t a club of people who have one similar interest, like a bicycle club or a garden club. We have the potential to be an economically, culturally, ethnically, racially and politically diverse group of people of all genders and sexual orientations with a plethora of interests.
3. Church provides us with a community that holds us in the midst of deep sadness and pain and rejoices with us when we celebrate. I wouldn’t have made it through the death of my husband without knowing I had all of you….a great cloud of witnesses that loved me. You have your own examples of how this community has been there for you when you needed it most.
4. Church stretches us. We have this tendency to surround ourselves with people who think and act and look like us. While the church provides comfort it also challenges our preconceived notions and way of being. Last week we were challenged by Dr. Jay Jones with the way we eat and consume and how that impacts the climate, creation and our siblings around the world.
5. The church enlarges us…expands us and widens our impact. When we join with others of varied gifts, strengths and interests for the good others, our reach is broadened.
6. Being part of church is a choice for the revolution. Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is already here and already among you.” We aren’t waiting for something to possibly happen in the future if everyone would just get with the program. We are choosing to live in God’s divine community right now, instead of the kingdoms of the world. We are deciding against capitalism and nationalism and instead we are choosing love… equity….compassion….the greater good.

All of these things are true and then along came a global pandemic. The last two years have required us to create new ways to do things and at the same time have left us weary and a bit traumatized. We are in a time of great transition. Trying to hold onto our rootedness while we innovate with integrity.

Moving to a virtual experience as church, out of necessity, gave us new eyes and amplified our message and mission beyond this sanctuary. I’m also sad to say that it turned us into watchers… consumers of worship…evaluators of a program….providers of feedback. Last summer, I was sitting with a group of people…not from this church…but people who, before the pandemic had been actively involved in their communities of faith. We were discussing how our different churches had navigated months of separation. The discussion revolved around whether we utilized Zoom or YouTube for worship or met outdoors. Several people said that even though their churches had now opened back up for in-person worship they were opting to stay home and watch it on a screen. They weren’t making that decision out of fear of getting Covid. It has become a preference. One person said, “I love being able to cook Sunday dinner while watching worship. I’m not sure I will ever go back to in-person worship.”

I fear that Covid turned worship into entertainment…..one more streaming service. We can access church 24/7, while never leaving our homes. What happens when we reduce church to listening to a podcast while we clean the house? We can’t consume the revolution. We can’t really welcome new people into community, while we are all just watching worship sometime during the week but we don’t’ know who else is there. We can’t hold the Christ light for each other through earbuds. Church isn’t just its music or its preaching or its architecture or a well-edited YouTube experience. Church is us, whether we are in this sanctuary or participating in a living room in Kansas or sitting in a wheelchair in the activity room at Woods. We are not consumable.

In the past, the message of the Christian church has felt like a military recruiting poster: “The church needs you”…like some organization out there needed to use us . But the church isn’t some entity out there separate from us. The church is us. My message today is, stop going to church, my friends. We aren’t spectators here. We don’t come to be entertained. We are the church. We are the ones who combine our strengths and our interests for the good of the divine community. Evaluation can be important but unless that evaluation is of our work together it feels a bit like American Bandstand. “I would give it a 75. It had some good lyrics, but the beat could have been more compelling.”

This morning I want you to take a moment to look around you. Stand up, please. Take a minute and turn all around. Notice each other. We might be a bit quirky, but we belong to each other. There is so much goodness in that truth. Appreciate the gift of each person here. Think about what we create together…an abundance that results in music, ministry, power, courage, boldness, action, extravagant love, insight, sacredness, justice, service, mutuality, innovation, solidarity….this is what our togetherness generates.

I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together. Today seven people are joining this church. They aren’t joining a building…beautiful as it might be. They might have heard we have a good choir, but it isn’t what made them decide to bind themselves to the rest of us. They may have loved our clever tag line – “A progressive church with a pipe organ” but that isn’t enough to make people stand up here in front of you and say, “I want to be part of this.” It is because of who we are and can be together…because something is happening here and something new is around the corner…something worth joining…something larger than any of us can possibly be alone.

I probably haven’t told you this enough lately but I love this church….which translates to “I love us and who we are as the body and blood and breath and sweat and tears and laughter and nerve of the body of Christ.” Amen.

Benediction

Relive your own baptism.

When you decided to become part of the body of Christ.

You are the church!

We are the church!

Amen.