

Sermon

Proper 16, Year A

August 24, 2014

Why do you come to church? That's a good question in today's world, because so many folks do not attend church any more. There are a lot of alternatives, not only on Sunday mornings but also alternative ways to find what we used to get in church, like a sense of peace and identity and purpose for our lives.

Though our particular parish is healthy and vital and many other congregations are still growing, there are vast parts of our country where churches stand empty and people no longer think of church as a central part of their lives. There are many reasons for that and some of the reasons are justified. But today, I don't want to focus on what's wrong with churches and why people don't come. I want us to consider why those of us who do come to church do it.

Part of the answer comes from the passage of Paul's Letter to the Romans that we heard today. It has to do with sacrifice. Not a popular word if you are trying to market your church as a "feel good" community center. But a central word for our faith and why coming to church matters.

Every Sunday we remember a sacrifice. We celebrate it. We draw strength from it. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, we see the world differently. Because of the story of Jesus and his Passion and death, we know that political and religious leaders are not always right—they can even conspire to commit injustice and think they are doing the right thing. Because of Jesus and his sacrifice, we know that innocent people can suffer in a way that shakes us to our core. And his sacrifice provides grace and hope to us when our despair feels overwhelming, whether it is due to personal loss or social injustice.

Through our faith in Jesus and his sacrifice, we can be changed as people and receive the grace we need to change our world. We know God loves us—that God-made-human was willing to suffer such cruelty in order to rescue us and provide our way back to God and God's ways. We know that God forgives our sins—just as Jesus forgave the unjust, the callous, and the indifferent, even from the cross. And because of his sacrifice, we know that God "gets it"—through Jesus, we know God understands what it is like to suffer. God understands our grief when we are hurting and God suffers with us.

So it is because of Jesus' sacrifice that we gather for worship, whether on Sunday morning, or Thursday at Noon, or whenever and wherever we gather. That sacrifice is what

holds us together and gives us hope, and power, and our identity as Christians. Remembering his sacrifice from week to week is central to our faith.

But there's more. And that "more" is so important in today's confusing and hurting world. We who gather for church are called to be a sacrifice, too. Paul described it as a "living sacrifice." Sounds like an oxymoron, doesn't it? Because if we think of a sacrifice at all, we may think of an old fashion animal sacrifice in which the victim is killed for religious purposes. But Paul calls us to live as our offering to God. What does being a "living sacrifice" mean for us?

At least part of it means to take what we remember here from week to week—what we remember about Jesus and his sacrifice and all that means with all its implications—and take that message with us into the world. Because the world is so in need of the message that Jesus brought, and lived, and died for—that God loves us and God wants us to love one another. That is so different from what the world teaches us. The world-- the powers that run things and the people they employ-- tells us something very different. And if we keep listening to the world's message, it is we who will be changed—and not in a good way.

Paul warned the people back then as he wrote, "Do not be conformed to this world..." In his day, Paul may have meant, "Don't sell out to the Roman Empire in order to get by." He may have meant, "Don't be afraid of people who are different from you—Gentiles, slaves, prisoners." Or he may have been reminding them, "Don't let everyday life distract you from what matters—that God cares for us and wants us to care for one another."

Today we still need to be aware of the threat of being "conformed to the world." The names of the powerful are different—but there are still people who run things in order to protect their power. The people we are afraid of now are different—but still too often we stereotype and stigmatize people who scare us. And today it is so easy to be distracted—so much that we can forget what really matters in life.

In order to be a living sacrifice, instead of being conformed to the world, Paul wrote about us being transformed through "the renewing of our minds." And that's where coming to church helps. Every day—really almost every moment of every day—we are bombarded with messages to get us to conform to the world. These messages work to get us to buy into the things that the powerful want us to believe, from what to buy in order to be happy; to whom to vote for in order to be safe. Things we see and hear on the news makes us scared of people. Shows, music, and the internet constantly distract us. All these things work together so that it is easy to forget the main thing—the message of Jesus' sacrifice, that God loves us and wants us to love one another.

When we come to church, we allow a different message to be formed inside of us that counteracts the message of the world. We sing about a God who loves, forgives, and provides.

We hear stories of how God has acted on behalf of God's people in the past. We get to talk with people and hear their stories of how God is caring for them today. We pray together and we are dismissed together, renewed to do the work God is calling us to do in the world. We gather to remember Jesus' sacrifice and then we take it with us, living his sacrifice through what we say and do in the world around us.

Here are some ways we can do that—

When people in power in the media or in government talk about “those people,” we don't buy it. Whomever “those people” are—immigrants, Tea Party Patriots, protesters in Ferguson (or the police in Ferguson), Muslims, Israelis, prisoners—the list is long. Whatever group—we won't buy the narrative that the world is selling in order to turn people against each other. Because we remember Jesus' sacrifice, we believe that God loves all “those people” and wants us to love them, too.

Instead, because we are a living sacrifice, we can be part of conversations-- formally and informally-- with people who are different from us. We can seek to understand others and be patient to help them understand us. Whether other people believe in Jesus like we do or not, we will let our faith guide our words and actions so that God's work of peace is moved forward.

We can do practical things in big and small ways. We can join people in our parish who have been serving others through the pantry for years and years. We can help people and not judge them. We can build relationships and seek to build a broader community based on Jesus' sacrifice and his message of God's love.

We can join our fellow parishioners who go to the women's prison in Alto and help the women maintain their relationships with their children. We can do our part in big and small ways to care for people because we have been shaped by Jesus' sacrifice and his message of God's care.

So that's why we come to church—to remember what is truly important and to be transformed. Let that memory of Jesus' sacrifice and God's love shape and change us to do what God wants-- and what the world so desperately needs. Amen.