

**OAK GROVE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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**May 30, 2021**

**Genesis 12:1–2**

**Ephesians 2:17–22**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s spirit.

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

**Genesis 12:1–2**

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.

**Ephesians 2:17–22**

So Jesus came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the God. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

There was a rule in my house when I was a teenager that was very simple and always enforced. The rule was if you did not go to church on Sunday you were not allowed to go out the following Saturday night. Period. I would not say that I was raised in a strict home, but I knew this rule was not to be tested. Church was important, and you go to church. I am sure at some point, in my I-know-everything teenage years, I asked my parents why church mattered at all? I don't remember what their answer was, but I imagine it was probably something like, "Because that is what we do. Now get your coat, or we'll be late." And any conversation probably stopped there.

But the question, or ones like it, are out there. Why does the church matter? Why be a part of a church? Why do we even need a church?

There has been a lot of weeping and gnashing of teeth as the percentage of people who are not actively involved in faith communities continues to increase. Fewer and fewer people are attending church each year.

Earlier this year, according to Gallup poll, the proportion of Americans who consider themselves members of a faith community dropped below 50 percent. It is the first time that has happened since Gallup has asked this since 1937. In 1937, the number of people who indicated they were a part of a religious community was 73 percent.

During the pandemic, as local and state governments indicated what organizations and businesses could open and to what degree for people to gather, churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques were not included in the first or even second rounds. Worse yet for some, these faith communities were labeled "non-essential." The buildings of faith communities were lumped together with entertainment venues and hair salons. Those places that made life a little easier or more enjoyable, but not essential. Some church leaders have expressed concerns that the

pandemic has created habits that will reinforce or accelerate the decline of faith communities.

This worry about the church is not new. In fact, since the beginnings of the faith, early church leaders encouraged the faithful to meet.

Encouraged them to see church as important. The book of Hebrews says, “let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit for some, but encouraging one another...” (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Some years ago, the chaplain at Princeton University, posted an article on Huffington Post entitled “Do you really need church?” It spurred a fair amount of discussion. Most of the comments to the article were negative. Many of them share stories about how church caused hurt or harm. I don’t dismiss these comments. My own negative experience with church as a teenager led me to leave the church for a time, and delayed my call into ministry. My experience is not unusual, and I am sure many of you share stories of the church being harmful or hurtful at worst and disappointing at best. It’s my hope that Oak Grove be a place where that harm doesn’t occur, and where people who have been hurt in the past, or who might be uncertain about church altogether can find a safe and welcoming place here.

In her blog post, the chaplain describes a conversation with a young college student. Someone seeking something larger, he might be described as falling into, like many, the category of spiritual-but-not-religious. Describing the conversation, she writes, “Despite his state of self-described religious none-ness, this student pursued conversations about spiritual things. And, as expressed by many students I talk with, he found my commitment to ‘traditional religion’ quite curious. He asked, ‘I mean, I get why you're into 'being spiritual' and 'helping people' and

everything, but why bother with Church? I just don't get that part. Do you really think you need it?"<sup>i</sup>

The student went on to discuss the irrelevance of the church and stated that everything that can be found in church, can be found somewhere else in society. "From community service projects to book clubs; from outreach to the poor to potlucks; from meditation groups to support groups, he described the many other places that provide much of what the Church used to (and occasionally still does) provide."<sup>ii</sup>

I wonder how many of you have had this conversation, or one like it? I know I have had them. If you are active in a church in today's world, it is more than likely that you will have this conversation. If you haven't had it yet, be prepared to have it in the future.

As the chaplain listened to her student, she says, she began to ask herself if she really needed church, if she should bother with church at all. Perhaps she could just find a social group, do some yoga, and maybe serve at the soup kitchen every once and awhile. But after some consideration, she concluded that she needs church for one simple reason. She writes, "I have a really bad memory. It's true. I have a terrible memory. Especially when it comes to remembering who I am as a child of God. Especially when it comes to remembering what God has done, and continues to do, in and through Jesus Christ. I forget who I am. I forget who God is. I forget God's Epic Story of Redemption and Liberation and Renewal and Beauty and Hope. I forget. A lot."

She comes to the conclusion that she needs a church because the church reminds her of the things that are important. And for her, the church is not about a building, but it's about the people. The "organic, collective, flesh and blood Body of Christ." She writes, "I'm talking about the beautiful but undeniably imperfect community of people who help me remember who I am, and to Whom I belong, over and over again."

Church, as she describes it, is the place where one is fed by the bread of life, where one is able to hear God's Story, read and proclaimed, week after week, where it's possible to have a transcendent experience of God, where she can serve others with an eye toward long-term, institutional, sustainable, biblically inspired justice-making and peace-keeping. Church is the place, for her, where she can be "reminded that all good things come from God." She needs the church, the church still matters, because it helps her remember all of these things.

I agree, at its best the church can be all of those things. It can be the place to experience the love and grace of God, to remember the goodness of God, the redemption and liberation of God. But I think there is something more as well to the answer of why church matters.

Church matters because that's the way God set it up. The church is created by God for God's purposes in the world. The church, as some might claim, is not a human-made institution. Rather it is created and brought together by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Genesis, we hear God speaking to Abraham and establishing a covenant with Abraham. Abraham and his descendants will be made great – more than the number of stars in the sky – their name will be great, God tells Abraham. But this calling, this covenant, is not a calling of privilege. Rather, the calling of Abraham is that he will be blessed *in order* to be a blessing. The covenant with Abraham isn't about some special rights, or privileges, what he and his descendants get from God, rather it is a higher calling to bear witness to God.

Later, Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians discusses how this covenant, through Jesus Christ, is extended to include the church. No longer, Paul says, do you need to be a direct descendant of Abraham to be part of the covenant. In fact, it is a broader because of what Jesus has done. Paul tells the church at Ephesus, and us, that we are included in the covenant

into what God is doing in the world. Paul says we, “are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” The church isn’t a human made institution, it’s a God given, and Spirit-filled blessing for the sake of others.

And did you catch the subtle phrasing there? Paul didn’t say the church was the building, no, the church is the people. As much as we have all longed to gather physically with others, if there is one thing that we can take from these past many months, is that the church is not, and never has been, the building. We don’t attend church, we are the church.

So, why does the church matter? It matters because, not only does it help us with our memories, not only are we a part of God’s household and all of those that have come before us – but it matters that we are church, because it is the gathering of the congregation, the gathering of the community of faithful that is the main form of God in Christ’s presence among us between Jesus’ ascension and coming again. The local congregation, the gathering of this particular community, is how Jesus shows up.

Jesus shows up in the way we care for one another, the way we support the community, the way we care for the earth, the way we name injustice and work to correct and eradicate it. The Christian faith, and the church, is sometimes relegated to a private and personal spirituality – but it must be more than that, or the work of God does not get done and the world suffers. If faith communities are not fully functioning, needs in the community will go unmet, and people’s wellness – not just spiritual – but physical and mental wellness will suffer.

One of my former professors has written, “The primary way the people of God exist in the world today is in the form of congregations.

Congregations are at the center of God’s plan and purpose. They bear witness through the Holy Spirit to the reconciling power of God through Christ in their midst by living as a reconciled community...

Congregations are unique in that they represent God in the world, being formed by the Spirit as particular communities that live in dynamic relationships within their larger communities.”<sup>iii</sup>

The church is God’s demonstration plot. In farming, often a strip of land, usually along a major roadway, is selected for what is known as a demonstration plot. This demonstration plot is where a new farming method, or a new type of seed, or fertilizer is used to raise a crop. The person trying to sell the new seed, or fertilizer would offer it free to the farmer as long as they would agree to plant it. (perhaps you have seen signs along the road in farm country with small numbers and pictures – these are what mark the demonstration plot). Most often farmers (like my own grandfather) would remain skeptical of the new innovation throughout the growing season as the crops grew. But come the harvest, most times, the innovation would perform better than what was surrounding it in the field. The area that grew the new type of seed, or used the new type of fertilizer could be examined, and the difference in the new product could be demonstrated. The church, at its best, is God’s demonstration plot in the world. The church’s very existence demonstrates that God’s redemptive reign has already begun. Its very presence invites the world to watch, listen, examine, and consider participating in God’s kingdom.<sup>iv</sup>

I am in the habit of recording the show CBS Sunday Morning to watch later in the day after church. I like it because they share stories about travel and the arts, and they have a segment at the end of the program called “a moment of nature” where they film just a minute or two of

nature, it's all its beauty and sound. It's a breath of fresh air and a reminder of the beauty of what God has created for me. But I also love this program because they often share positive and uplifting stories.

One such story was from El Paso of a high school basketball team that had a team manager named Mitchel Marcus, who was developmentally disabled. Mitchel loved basketball, and the coach decided that no matter what the score or circumstance, that for his final game of the year, Mitchel would get to suit up and play in the game. With a minute and a half left in the game, and his team only leading by 10, the coach put Mitchel in. The crowd started chanting Mitchel's name. Mitchel, Mitchel, Mitchel. His teammates did everything they could to get Mitchel the ball, but each time he either missed the shot, or like on the team's last possession, Mitchel knocked it out of bounds, so that it went to the other team with just seconds left. Mitchel wouldn't get to score. But what happened next was surprising. The student from the other team yelled Mitchel's name, then threw the ball right to him. Mitchel scored a basket. When the boy from the other team, Jonathon, was asked by the reporter, why he did what he did, he responded, "I was raised to treat others how you want to be treated. I just thought Mitchel deserved his chance, it was his opportunity."

The church, and its people are God's demonstration plot. At its best, the church is where we learn to be kind, the church is where we learn to be forgiving, the church is where we practice how to show others our love. And the church is where we can invite people to share in participating in God's mission for the world.

God's plan for the world is the people of God. God's plan is the church. Ultimately, church is something that God has chosen, and we are invited to join in. In the book of John, Jesus tells his disciples, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit."

This choosing reminds us of the same covenant with Abraham. This choosing is meant not for privilege or special status. Our choosing by God to be agents of God's love is a designation for service to others.

Ultimately, you will have to answer for yourself, why church matters. My hope is that it's not a hard question for you to answer. My hope and prayer is that Oak Grove can continue to live up to God's plan.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tara-woodardlehman/do-you-really-need-church\\_b\\_3751147.html?utm\\_hp\\_ref=tw](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tara-woodardlehman/do-you-really-need-church_b_3751147.html?utm_hp_ref=tw)

<sup>ii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>iii</sup> A Field Guide for the Missional Church. Rick Rouse & Craig Van Gelder. Page 34.

<sup>iv</sup> This idea comes from Craig Van Gelder's *The Essence of the Church*, page 99-100.