

I didn't go to church today
I trust the Lord to understand.
The surf was swirling blue and white
The children swirling on the sand.
He knows, he knows how brief my stay,
How brief this spell of summer weather,
He knows when I am said and done
We'll have plenty of time together.

-Ogden Nash

Well, you may or may not have felt like Mr. Nash this morning, this gorgeous late summer morning, but you came to church anyway.

As I have been studying the scriptures for today during the week I came to see that they all contain little lessons for us. Jesus tells us where we should sit and how to be a good guest. The writer of Hebrews tells us how to be hospitable and what to do about money and marriage. The prophet Jeremiah has some very strong words for us about chasing after false gods.

Do we come to church to be lectured, first by the Bible and then by me? Gosh, I hope not. This week, though, I've been wondering about our readings, my sermons, and all the little bits and pieces we talk about. I'm not sure how they always connect to the big picture, the real Truth. Sometimes I feel as though we dance around the subjects of faith and wisdom, and truth and I'm not sure we get to what is the heart of the matter.

Then I listen to the news and wonder even more about what we do here in church. The political storms rage on; who is right, who is wrong and where is our country going? Natural disasters continue to take many, many lives, and make many more miserable. And here we are sitting in church trying to make sense of all of it.

Where is God in all of this?

It's an age old question; does our worship and our faith really do anything for us or do we just show up here out of habit each Sunday?

And if we don't feel worried and anxious about all of this already, here comes Jeremiah shaking his finger at us and telling us to stop going after worthless things. Boy, aren't you glad you came to church today!

And then we get advice both from the writer of Hebrews and from Jesus in Luke's gospel. If we come to church for advice on how to live our lives, well, we get plenty of it today.

I want to take a moment off from my rant about church and its relevance to talk a little about the Letter to the Hebrews. We've heard passages from this letter for the last few weeks, and this is our last week to hear from this Book. Hebrews is one of the books of the New Testament that we know very little about. We aren't sure who wrote it or when, or where. We aren't sure to whom it was originally addressed. The Title "to the Hebrews" was added later to the text. We don't even think it was really ever meant to be a letter.

The well known preacher Thomas Long says of Hebrews, "Imagine being handed a book today with the comment, 'Here, you may enjoy this. It was written in America or Russia or France, I'm not sure, by a Jew, - or was it a Gentile? – anyway, it was written sometime between 1920 and 1970. Enjoy.'"

So, the book itself is an enigma. But it is written in very beautiful Greek. As I've said, it's not really a letter so much as it is a sermon. Perhaps it is a sermon that was written down by one preacher to be delivered in another place by another preacher. But we can say something about the people to whom the sermon was being preached. We can tell this from the content of the letter or sermon. The people were tired. They were tired of having to defend their faith at every turn, they were tired of all the work that being a Christian entailed, and they were tired of trying to keep their prayer life going. Maybe they were tired of going to Church. The preacher tells them, in this long complicated sermon all the reasons that they should have

faith and hope. He preaches about the meaning and nature of Jesus, which is sometimes called Christology in theological circles. Who was Jesus, and how does he affect our lives today through his very being? That's what the Preacher was trying to tell his congregation. Hmm. Maybe this does have some relevance for today. Maybe we can see through it why we come to church.

Rather than seeing our passage this morning as just advice on how to be a good Christian, look again at the passage. "Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured as though you yourselves were being tortured." I would add, remember those on our prayer list who need our prayers and love, as though you need our prayers and love. We are asked to not just do as we are told by a godly person, but are asked to see how our lives are linked to everyone around us, both those of us who are here today, and those of us who are not here.

Look around you in the pews. Who do you depend on? Who is it that you expect to see when you come here and would be disappointed if they do not come. We missed Christine last week, and we are glad she's back with us. We had beautiful guitar music, though, and the choir was lovely as always. That's a reason we come to church isn't it? It's the beauty that we have in our church building and our music and our liturgy. This week and next, we also have a treat in the beautiful artwork on our walls organized by many of you. God has made a beautiful world outside, and God has given us the skills and the talent to create such beauty in our midst that it lifts our hearts to see and hear beautiful art and artistry and music.

I have digressed, but with good reason. We found a reason to be here. But, we were speaking of people who we would miss if we did not see them. Likewise, there may be someone who enjoys seeing you here who would be disappointed if you were not. People lift us up. We see Christ in them and we depend on each other. Jane sends us all birthday cards. Where would we be without Jane's cards. So we have a couple of answers to the question I posed in the

beginning. We come to church for each other, for the comfort, joy and beauty that we bring to each other by gathering here, and by praying together for those who are in any sort of trouble, sorrow, need, or sickness. Our best life is that which is linked to those around us.

Let's move on to the Gospel for some more advice...or so it first appears. Jesus tells a parable when he is at dinner, about how people choose their seats at a dinner party. To fully understand this parable we have to remember that status and class were very highly ordered in the ancient world. That's not to say that we have done away with class distinctions, of course. Just think of the different lines at the airport and in the airplane. But at least we do not have seats in the church assigned based on the old fashioned pew rent. Thank heavens there is no first class, business class and tourist class here in church. But not so in Jesus' day.

The place that a person sat at a banquet or in the synagogue was strictly ordered. Everyone knew who was above them, and who was below them in status and it was kept that way. People only associated with those near them in social rank and one wouldn't think of doing otherwise. So, Jesus is asking people to do something very counter-cultural. Jesus says, "Forget what rank you have earned or deserve or been born to, and go associate with someone else." Jesus asks us to be humble, and to step outside our comfort zone.

We practice that here when we don't just talk to our good friends at coffee hour, but go up to someone standing alone, or someone we barely know and speak to them for a change. I know many of you do that, it's one of the things that sets us apart as a church of hospitality. We make hikers and newcomers alike as welcome as if they had been here for years with our great food.

Oh, that's right. That's why we come to church! How could I forget! The wonderful food we serve each other week by week!

All of these reasons for coming to church are true and good. In every parable that Jesus tells, he wants us to learn by his little stories what the Kingdom of God is like, will be like, and can be like now.

Why do we come to church? Bottom line? We want to remember who we really are: that we are God's own beloved **in** God's own kingdom. We want to love and be loved. We want the beauty, the joy, the camaraderie and the fulfillment that we cannot get in the world of politics or Wall Street. And more than that, we want to share God's kingdom with whomever we can, both within these walls and outside them in our aid to others.

So, yes, you could have stayed home today and said your prayers by yourself, and then have gone out to enjoy the beauty of God's world on a walk or a game of golf, but you did not. You came to church today; for beauty, for food, for friendship and support, for love and for Life.

I'm glad you're here.