

**Why Go to Church**  
**Psalm 73**  
**Scott Huie**  
**July 15<sup>th</sup> 2007**  
**Westminster Presbyterian Church**

This morning we continue our summer sermon series on Sabbath rest entitled, “Too Tired to Run, Too Scared to Rest.” Before I read the Scripture, I would like to share a few notes regarding the sermon. First, in preparing for this sermon, I ran across a treatment of this text by my New Testament professor at seminary, Charlie Cousar. His interpretations were so apt that they provide the foundation for this message. Second, as part of the sermon, we will be witnessing a drama adapted from a skit by Ann Weems called “You—Sitting in the Pew Next to Me.” Midge and Bob Coker, two of our more unique members, will be our resident thespians. For purposes of this drama, please do not think of them as husband and wife, but simply as acquaintances.

(Read Scripture)

Why do you go to church? Maybe it is a question you haven't thought about much. But if going to church is something you do every week—or even every month—perhaps it would be even shortsighted not to ponder the issue. So let's make this the topic du jour: Why go to church? After all, the church is so demanding of our time and money. It seems so often embroiled in controversial topics that only make our blood pressure rise. And Sunday mornings are such great times to read the paper (Sunday's paper is a big one), enjoy a second cup of coffee or a second bowl of Captain Crunch. It's a great time to relax—to actually have a day of complete rest, as the Fourth Commandment says. It's a great time to join your favorite foursome at the first tee. And for most families, with both parents working full time, Sunday mornings present rare moments during the week for a family to simply be together as family. Just getting the little ones fed, clothed, cleaned, and ready to go to church is a major undertaking. Is going to church really worth the hassle, the time, the money? Why go to church?

And as a related question, does the Christian community really make a difference? There certainly are plenty of folks doing seemingly well outside the church, folks who want the best for their kids, who vote just as you and I vote, who don't cheat on their spouses, who really care about the common good. Is the church really any different than a social club? Does it really matter? Why go to church? Well let us now listen in on the thoughts of two people who raise some of the same

questions.

(This is a dialogue taking place between two people sitting next to each other in church. They do not look at each other, but look out over the congregation, as the dialogue is in their thoughts only.)

First Person:

You—sitting in the pew next to me—

I don't know you.

Oh, I know your name.

I know the "Hi, how are you?" part of you.

I know the "Rainy weather we're having, isn't it?" part of you.

But I don't know you--

Not what you're thinking,

Not where you've come from,

Not where you're going.

You sit so still:

Are you serene

Or are you simmering inside?

Are you content with life

Or are you churning?

Are you here because it's a habit

Or because it's a joy

Or because your mother brought you years ago?

Is it expected of you?

Are you setting an example for the children?

Are you glad to be here

Or are you just tired?

Are you bored

Or are you filled with fire?

Are you tuned into what's being said

Or are you disenchanted?

Did you come from a chaotic morning

Or from too much quiet?

Are you thinking about last night's party

Or this afternoon's ball game?

Or are you wondering what it's all about?

Will you ever reveal yourself to me

Or are you just another person in the pew I'll never know?

Second Person:

You—sitting in the pew next to me—

I don't know you.

Oh, I know your background.

I know you're here every Sunday.

I know you're very big around here—

Church school teacher, chairperson of this and that,

On all the important committees.

Even went to the national meeting, didn't you?

Who are you behind that smile,

Behind all that activity—

Are you for real?

Are you doing it all for your image

Or do you love Christ so much you've got to give your time?

Are you hustling

Or are you filled with God's spirit?

Are you desperately trying to fill the emptiness in your life

Or are you overflowing with goodwill?

Would you tell me if I asked you

Or would you play a game with me?

Would you really care if I told you my problems?

Would you really listen

Or would you be looking over my shoulder?

Could I be honest with you

Or would my honesty make you nervous?

Would you take the time?

Would you be interested to know what I feel?

Would my doubts make you uneasy?

Would you want to get involved?

Do you even care what I'm all about?

Where I'm heading,

What I'm thinking.

Does the fact that we're sitting side by side in God's sanctuary

Make us community?

Does it make the difference?

Or are you just another person in the pew I'll never know?

I think in one way or another we all wrestle with the question of why go to church

and what is its real purpose. Some of us are born and schooled into the faith; we come out of habit. Others of us perhaps are new converts or we simply have returned to the church out of a renewal of our faith. Still some, I suspect, come here simply out of curiosity, interested in this "God stuff" but not really committed to the lordship of Jesus Christ. And perhaps a few of us come because we want our kids to be in this wholesome environment.

We come from different backgrounds and for different reasons. We come with different expectations. Yet, in spite of our diversity, a common denominator is that we come to this sanctuary out of a world that is hurting, confused, lost, and really outright unfair at times. Such a reality poses a problem for us—and not only for us, but also for people throughout the ages. Why isn't life fair? we ask. Well let us consider the confessions of one tormented by this dilemma, and yet one who soon found his way back to church.

The psalmist begins with one of the traditional affirmations of the faith community: "God is truly good to those who do right." The psalmist, however, is uncomfortable with such words, for they defy his real life experiences outside the church. To the psalmist, such "wisdom" appears to be nothing more than foolishness. After all, wherever he turns, the people who prosper are not the ones who do right, who go to church, who keep the commandments, who care about the oppressed. Rather, it is just the opposite. Those who prosper are the ones skipping church, taking easy trips to the beach on weekends and returning to work on Monday with nice sun tans. Those who prosper have no troubles, no hang-ups with "middle class morality," no care for the poor. Those who prosper are engaged in self-love to the point of self-absorption. And these are the people who always seem to get ahead. The cheater gets the better grade at school. The young business person who viciously climbs over others indeed becomes president of the company. It pays to be wicked, the psalmist discovers. Or as Leo Ruroucher once put it, "Nice guys finish last."

And to make matters worse, such an apparent truth easily makes one jealous. The psalmist admits it: "What good did it do me to keep my thoughts pure and refuse to do wrong? I am sick all day, and I am punished each morning." It's as if he is saying, "I can't keep up with the Joneses if I have to play by the rules all the time. Heck, the grass is greener on the other side, and I'm tired of coming up on the short end of the stick. I want a piece of that action even if I have to step on a few people to get there." In his frustration, the psalmist, for a moment, gives in. He makes his case for living without God. It actually works, so it seems.

But then something changes. The psalmist decides to go to church. Why does he go? Who knows? Chances are he goes out of habit; his parents always took him. How often does he go? Again, we can only guess. But we do know that he goes enough so that one day surrounded by the people of God, this tormented soul who had lost faith is able to believe again.

Well what happened in church that day? Was there a moving sermon followed by an altar call? Again who knows exactly? The testimony of the psalmist, however, reveals that he gained a new understanding, a new vision for a distinct, unique reality, one where the exalted would be humbled and humble would be exalted. In church, the psalmist discovers the true end of those self-absorbed people whose prosperity he envies.

And as Cousar points out, that is what church is about—offering an alternative perspective, a perspective found nowhere else. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Where else are you going to hear that? "Do not repay evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all." Where else are you going to hear that? "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Where else do you find love like that?

Friends, it is in this community of faith—through our worship, our Bible study, our circle meetings, our fellowship, our service to our members and to the community—that we are born anew by God with a fresh new perspective. It is here where we are defined not by how "successful" we are, but by the hope we have in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures here and elsewhere prod us into seeing with new eyes—eyes of faith. And when we see with the eyes of faith, we are free to be ourselves. We are free to be vulnerable with one another and with God. We are free to express our doubts as well as our affirmations. We are free to explore what it really means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

(The drama continues)

First Person:

You—sitting in the pew next to me—

I'm scared.

Years are passing quickly

And I seem to have little control over my life.

It's as though somebody else

Set out a course for me.

When did I decide on this lifestyle?  
I'm scared by the subtleties of life.  
I'm scared by what's expected of me  
By some unknown "they" out there.  
I'm scared by the pushing, the pulling, the pressures.  
Whoever decided that I had to live on this street in this house  
And work like crazy to live on another street in a bigger house?  
Whoever decided for me that success was chasing after things?  
And that there's no end to it...  
Keep chasing...  
My life dedicated to owning.  
Whoever decided I owed my children bigger and better things?  
I'm scared when I take a good look at my way of life.  
I'm scared when I look at myself.  
That's why I'm here—  
Because I've heard there is a better way.  
I've heard that some people take Christ seriously.  
I've heard that maybe in church I could be born again.  
Is it possible?  
Could I talk to you about it?  
Would you laugh to think successful me needs you?  
Or would you be compassionate because you know I'm scared?  
Maybe you'll be the one to tell me...  
Or are you just another person in the pew I'll never know?

Second Person:

You—sitting in the pew next to me—  
What are you really doing here?  
Do you believe in Christ Jesus?  
How much?  
Enough to risk?  
How much of a risk?  
Risk your reputation?  
Risk your family?  
Your money?  
Do you?  
Do you believe in Christ?  
Or is Christianity a convenience?  
Something to fill in on consensus forms,

Something one just goes along with,  
Something undemanding,  
Something nice...  
Do you believe?  
Do you know what you believe?  
Will you share it with me?  
Or are you just another person in the pew I'll never know?

(At this point, the two persons come out of their thoughts. The service is over. One turns to the other and says:)

First Person:  
Hi, how are you?

Second Person:  
Oh, fine. Rainy weather we're having, isn't it?

First Person:  
Yes, isn't it?

Church can be a place to go to pass some time, make a few friends, spout out a few spiritual platitudes, and look real "religious." But oh it can be so much more than just that. I think I've experienced what church can be this last month, spending parts of three weeks in the community of faith at Montreat, at the Great Escape, and with our mission team in Juarez, Mexico. In each location, the church wasn't just a place. More importantly, it was the people, God's people living in community, worshipping, and living in love for one another. Church, my friends, no question, can become the heart and soul of one's faith journey.

In fact, the church is the means by which we live out our faith and become "born again," is it not? John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, once said, "There is no salvation outside the church." Cyprian, the early church father said, "No one can have God for his father who does not have the church as his mother." The writer to the Hebrews commands us, "Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together."

These writers were all on to something. We truly become followers of Christ as we come together in community, as we worship God and study God's word together, as we hold each other accountable, as we bear one another's burdens. And when

personal faith fades—slips—bogs down—the community of faith and its memory sustain us. We fall back on the great hymns, the beautiful scriptures, the sturdy pews, the old rugged cross, the communion table, the baptismal font. The memories endure—a teacher who taught us passionately even when we were obnoxious, an elderly woman who reminded us seemingly out of nowhere that she was praying for us, a youth leader who gave so much of her time and energy. The church simply won't let us go. It may not be able to answer all the questions of life that haunt us, but it is enough to keep us from betraying our heritage. It is enough to keep us from abandoning a community that won't abandon us.

So the psalmist comes full circle. He moves from cynicism to disappointment to jealousy and finally to confidence in the faithfulness of his God. He says, "In heaven I have only you, and on this earth you are all I want. My body and mind may fail, but you are my strength and my choice forever." The psalmist is like saying, "I never left you. It may have seemed that way, Lord. I may have wanted to. But you simply would not let go of my hand. In fact, you squeezed so hard, I wanted to say `mercy.'" After coming to church, the psalmist is unabashedly a companion of God without apology.

Amazing, isn't it? Not just the beauty of his testimony, but also the very fact that he can make such a testimony even as the circumstances surrounding his life do not change. As Cousar points out, it's the same world now as it was before the psalmist went to church. Cheaters still win, the meek still haven't inherited the earth, the riddles still remain. Nothing has changed. And yet, everything has changed. Despite doubts and uncertainty, God is present. The time spent in the sanctuary has made bearing the contradictions possible. The psalmist can even joyfully face life. The disorientation has given way to a reorientation. Perplexity has given way to praise. Doubt has given way to confession. A life of vanity has given way to a life of deep, rich meaning. And that's reason enough to go the church.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE—JULY 15, 2007

O God, whose breath inspires life and whose hear beats in the womb of the world,

You tell us that blessed are those who are pure in heart for they shall see God.

We ask this day that you give us a vision for who you are.

Help us to see that you are not some arbitrary tyrant;

You are not a butler who caters to every whim;

You are not a sheriff in the sky ready to get us when we are bad.

Help us to see you for who you are...a loving parent, a daddy, guiding us, shaping us, holding our hand even as we try to pull away.

We thank you for your never-failing love.

We thank you that you give us a second chance, a third chance, a hundredth chance.

Lord, help us to see not only you for who you are, but may we see the world for what it is, a place created good, but a place that is fallen.

We pray for the many needs of this planet—a world where a beautiful little girl is tragically murdered and where a terrorist bomb threatens innocent people.

We pray for the many needs in our community.

We pray for the sick, the hurting, the lonely, the scared.

Bring comfort and peace to those who are troubled.

May this church be a true sanctuary, where people find comfort and inspiration to go out and be faithful disciples.

O God, we know that it is good to be near you.

We make you are refuge.

And now hear us as together we pray the prayer that Jesus taught, saying, “Our father...”

### HYMNS:

#382 Be Thou My Vision

#374 O Love That Will Not Let Me Go

#252 Sweet, Sweet Spirit

### Special Music

Anthem      In the Garden      Olivia Taylor and Tori McClanahan

Offertorty      Draw Me Close      Kadie Queen