

**Sermon Preached September 20, 2015**  
**Year B, Proper 20**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church**  
**Beverly Farms, Massachusetts**  
**The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Lord and our Redeemer. Amen.

Here we are again! Returning to church after the break of the summer. We are home from our travels. The kids are back in school. Our fall wardrobes are hauled out. Halloween paraphernalia is on sale in the stores. High School seniors are working on college applications (I throw that one in because my son Duncan is one!). And so too the church program year begins again. The choir is back (yippee!). The church school is busy. The pews are full. And so we might ask ourselves: why? Why do we come to church, and bring our kids to church school, and eat bread and wine every week? Why do we bother?

So I thought I'd reflect on some of the myths associated with church as a means to consider the answer to the question, "Why do we come to church?"

**Myth number one, "We go to church to get baptized and learn to believe in Jesus or we will go to hell."**

Actually, we go to church to learn the good news and live it. The word "gospel" means "good news" in Greek. While many Christians will affirm that God loves you, they will often go on to say that God will only show his love to you if you believe in Jesus and are baptized or he will condemn you to everlasting torture. I don't know about you, but if the best Jesus message is "you don't want to burn when you die," I wouldn't bother coming to church. Fear is an unhappy motivator. The popular pastor Rob Bell once said that getting people to believe in something based on what they don't want is a poor way to do it.

That in fact, the argument to believe in Jesus in order to avoid hell is as compelling as that of a young man who gets down on one knee, proposes to a young women with the observation, “Marry me, so I don’t have to spend my life with Sheila.”<sup>1</sup>

God doesn’t work like that! God is love and love demands freedom. God will love us whether we believe in Jesus or not, whether we are baptized or not. The thing is, heaven and hell begin in this life, and we are the ones who create it. As St. Catherine of Siena pointed out, “All the way to heaven is heaven.” How we live and love impacts us starting now, not just when we die. Jesus doesn’t ask us to believe in him or understand him, Jesus asks us to follow him. Intellectual assent to in his divine nature is not necessary. And while baptism is an important commitment to the beginning of this journey, it is not a guarantee of an end-result.

Nor is this “following” that we do some sort of litmus test to earn our way to the Pearly Gates, rather it is an imitating of Jesus who models a

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<sup>1</sup> From CD of Inspire Conference with Richard Rohr, 2014.

heavenly life in this life. He shows us what heaven on the way to heaven looks like. When you are assembling a toy for your child on Christmas Eve, it much easier to do if you have the instructions with you. You might figure it out without instructions, but it would be needlessly difficult. Jesus gives us the instruction manual for life. How do we, who are material beings but who contain a divine soul, how do we balance the two harmoniously? Salvation is not the avoidance of hell, rather, salvation is the union of heaven and earth and all creation with God. In John 12 Jesus says, “I came not to judge the world, but to heal the world.”

Church is a place where we can, in community, learn the stories of Jesus and his teachings. Learn the instruction book so we can avoid creating hell on earth, and start living in heaven now. These wisdoms include those Jesus taught both through word and action.

**Myth number two, “The purpose of Church is to teach us to be moral people.”**

If I hear another person say, when speaking of Christianity, “Well, as long as I’m a good person, that’s the most important thing,” I think I will scream! There is a vision of the church out there that our role is to create good citizens: dutiful, responsible, doesn’t question authority, is thoughtful, cheerful, and loving. Bah Humbug I say! Not that many of these aren’t good qualities to possess, but these are not the purpose of church.

Such a milquetoast, tired, boring understanding of Christianity is what leads to a decline in church membership. Why bother going to church if you can be a good person on your own? As a rejection of that, some have come to believe that they need to focus only on a particular morality and believe it with passion. For instance oppose homosexuality, big business, conservatives, or liberals, and you have a clear shot to heaven. This is yet another distortion of the gospel. Christianity is much bigger and more meaningful than simply our morality.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about being a good citizen. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about having a particular morality. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about turning your world upside down and orienting it towards God in Christ. It is about living as a revolutionary in a broken world. It's not about milquetoast. It's about red meat. It's about loving your neighbor, even the ones who aren't lovable; even the ones who are sinful. Both the ones in the cubicles next to you as well as the ones who live on the other side of the globe and aren't Christian. It's about striving for justice for the oppressed. It's about voting for candidates who will help the poor. It's about fighting racism, ageism, sexism, and anything that distorts the dignity of another human being. It's about confronting lies and evil. It's about saving God's good earth. It's about standing up to do and say the right thing even at personal cost.

Most importantly Christianity is about loving and worshipping God. The Holy Trinity is the source of all and deserving of our daily prayers, praise, and thanks. We are not the center of our lives. Money is not the center of our lives. Good morality is not the center of our lives.

Not even the Bible is the center of our lives. God in Christ is the center.  
All else should point towards God.

Morality is the result of faith, not the purpose of religion. As Christians we do the moral thing not because it's "nice," and not because it's how we get to heaven, but because our love for God is so passionate that it overwhelms us and we cannot do otherwise.

**Myth number three, "Only good people can go to church. If you are sinful, you aren't welcome."**

I work out at a gym that is part of a chain which prides itself on not catering only to bulked-up gym-jocks, but ordinary people. They don't want customers to feel intimidated or shamed by the others working-out next to them. So the slogan of the gym is "You Belong."

In fact, the slogan is written in three foot tall letters above the exit, so as you sit grunting away on the ab machine, wondering if you've popped a gasket, the giant sign affirming that "you belong" reminds you that you are doing just fine. On this past Friday during my workout I meditated

on the sign and thought how great it would be if every church could put that same sign over their altars. You belong. It would solve a lot of fears and shame that many people have about attending church.

In today's gospel, when Jesus realizes that his disciples are going on an ego-trip about which one of them is the greatest, he pulls a small child into his arms. He says, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me." Jesus is saying that welcoming a child, someone with no status, is the equivalent of welcoming God. No one can be greater than that. In other words, there is no greatest or least, we are all equally and infinitely valuable and welcome.

I wish I had a nickel for every time one of my non-church-going friends said to me, "Oh, I can't go to church! I'm so sinful, that if I went, I'd probably get struck by lightning at the church door!" Over and over again Jesus tells us that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love. There is no life that is too shameful, or embarrassing, or lost, or

morally reprehensible, that it disqualifies you from God's love or life in the church. We do not need to pretend perfection at church. We all have shortcomings, and we are expected to address them, but we are still loved by God. Parents know that our even if our kids gravely disappoint us, we will still love them. God desires not our punishment, but our healing. You belong.

### **Conclusion**

So we don't go to church to avoid hell, or to become moral and nice people, or to pretend to be perfect. That would be a waste of your time and mine. We go to church because life is hard, and because we and those we love and the earth suffer, and we desire healing.

We go to church because despite feelings to the contrary, we secretly hope that we are valuable and loved. We go to church to connect with other people who are on this journey alongside us, that we may support and cheer each other on. But mostly we go to church to draw closer to God in Christ, to learn the stories, to engage in worship, and to find

ways to unite our souls with our Creator, to fill our hearts, that we may then shine that love out into the world.

Amen.