

"Don't Go to Church"

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First Presbyterian Church of Corpus Christi, Texas

Romans 12:1-18

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Today is our annual "Back to Church Sunday," where we have made an extra effort to invite people to come find out what many of us already know—that First Presbyterian is a growing and active Christ-centered, Bible-based church. So with all of the emphasis on being here today and inviting others to be here also, what I'm about to say might surprise you. God does *not* want you to go to church. Let me explain.

I know one of the things that many of you enjoy about this time of year is the change of seasons. After a long, hot summer it's finally *football* season. And we're all wondering if this will be the year for a record-setting ninth Super Bowl appearance. So let me remind you that the Steelers kick off at 7:20 tonight.

Or maybe college or high school football is more your speed. Last weekend I found myself at the G-P high school football game. As I was watching this game I was reminded that it takes a tremendous amount of physical strength and energy to play football, or any other sport for that matter, well. By the end of the game the players had done their best and were exhausted. They won, by the way.

But there was something else that I noticed. I was *not* exhausted. There I was, along with hundreds of other people in the stands, in the same stadium for the same football game as the players. But I didn't expend as much energy as the players on the field. In fact, I didn't do anything. I just sat there.

It seems to me that sometimes we tend to put church in the same

category as a football game. We show up, take our seats, enjoy the show and then leave. We "go" to church. We become like fans. But here's the thing: Jesus isn't really interested in fans. In the gospels, every time people started turning into fans, Jesus either left quickly or He challenged them to become followers. What Jesus wants is completely committed followers. He doesn't want you to go to church, He wants you to *be* the church.

So what's the difference? When we "go" to church, we think of the church as a place, a building. Or maybe we think of church as an event that happens on Sunday mornings. But that's not what the Bible describes as "church." In fact, the Christian church was around and active and growing for hundreds of years before they began to have buildings. In the early years they met in the Jewish Temple and in people's homes.

No, the church is not a building and it's not an event. The church is people. In fact, the Greek word used in the Bible for church, *ecclesia*, literally means "assembly" or "gathering." The word church is simply the gathering together of Christ-followers. But what we find throughout the New Testament is that we are gathered together for a purpose, to fulfill God's purpose for us.

Here we see the other problem of "going" to church like fans going to a football game. We go for what we can get out of it. It becomes all about our personal preference. I have sometimes heard people say something like, "I don't go to that church any

more. I just wasn't being fed." They view church kind of like a spiritual buffet and if they're not happy with what they get out of it they leave.

On the other hand, the picture of the church we get in the Bible is not so much a buffet, but more like a potluck supper, where each person brings something to share with the whole group. As the Apostle Paul says in today's reading, "The church is like your body. It's made up of different parts with different functions, and each part is important." Instead of going to church, be the church.

What does being the church look like? In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says our citizenship is in heaven. In other words, the church on earth is like a colony of heaven. When nations established colonies in far off lands, the language and customs of the native countries continued in the colonies and the colonists remained citizens of the mother land. What Paul is saying is that our citizenship is in heaven, so our language and our customs should not be the same as the world around us but should look like heaven, where everything is done for the glory of God.

As we look at this passage from Romans 12, I find three things we should do instead of going to church. We should go to worship, go to learn, and go to serve. Notice that each of these is a verb and not a noun. We're not going to a place or event, we're going to accomplish our purpose. Let's look at each of these.

Instead of going to church, we should go to worship. Verse 1 says, "I appeal to you therefore, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Worship is

the most important thing we do as individuals. It's what God created us to do above anything else. Our primary purpose is to glorify God. Every thought, every action, every decision in our life should bring glory to Jesus Christ. That's what it means to present your self as a living sacrifice. It means putting God's purpose for your life ahead of your own personal desires. And guess what? It's not that easy.

One of the best ways to help us get better at having worshipping lives is to gather with other believers to worship together. The truth is that we need each other to be able to worship fully. We need to hold each other accountable and encourage each other when one of us gets out of the habit of worshipping. If you notice that someone hasn't been in worship in a few weeks, pick up the phone or send a quick email letting him know he's missed. So that's the first step. Instead of going to church, we go to worship.

The second thing we find in this passage is that instead of going to church, we go to learn. After his resurrection and just before he ascended to heaven, Jesus met with his disciples and he gave them this instruction: "Go and make disciples, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." Disciples are learners. If we are going to follow Jesus and obey his commands, we need to study the Bible. Verse 2 of Romans 12 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

That renewal of our mind, that transformation of our thoughts, comes from reading and studying the Word of God. Each one of us should be reading our Bibles regularly. Every day is best. You

might find it helpful to keep a journal or to write notes or questions about what you've read. Every follower of Christ should also be involved in some kind of Bible study with other Christians. We have some that meet here on Sunday mornings and at other times during the week.

The third thing this passage shows us is that instead of going to church we should go to serve. As we've already seen, God has given each one of us unique gifts that he wants us to use to benefit the church and other people. He hasn't just given a select few people the gifts to be the church and everyone else just shows up to watch. If you are a Christian, God has given you gifts that he expects you to use for his glory and for the benefit of other people. Paul lists some of those gifts in verses 6-8. Your gifts might include preaching, teaching, serving, giving, leading, or doing acts of mercy. This is certainly not a complete list, only some examples. You also probably have more than one of these gifts.

The point is that whatever your gifts, God intends for you to use them for the community of believers, the church. There is a great description of what a church member should be in verses 9-16. This is my paraphrase: "Let love be genuine. Hate what is evil; cherish what is good. Love each other like family. *Outdo* one another in showing honor. Do not be lazy in your enthusiasm, but serve the Lord with all your energy. Rejoice in hope, be patient in hard times, and pray all the time. Take care of each other's needs. Bless people who hurt you. Don't hurt them back. Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Get along with everyone and don't consider yourself better than other people."

Being the church means serving other people, including both people who are part of the church and people outside the church family. Remember that the church is called the

Body of Christ. That means we are the hands and feet of Jesus in our community. When there's something Jesus wants to do in Corpus Christi, or lots of other places even, we have the privilege of being a part of that work. But we also have the responsibility as well.

So my challenge to you on "Back to Church Sunday:" Don't go to church. Go to worship, go to learn, go to serve. Get out of the stands and get out on the field. Get in the game and give it everything you've got. Don't go to church, *be* the church.

Amen