

## WHY JOIN?

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 21, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is the third of five sermons this Fall focused on “Why” questions related to the church: “Why Church?”; “Why Westminster?”; “Why Join?” “Why Give?” “Why Tithe”?*

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*Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, ‘There is peace and security’, then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then, let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*

*Prayer: “Saint Augustine said: ‘No one but you is a teacher of the truth, whatever the immediate place in which or the immediate source from which it shines forth.’ Lord, my prayer is that this sermon and this service will be such a place today. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”*

This Fall, as many of you know, I am preaching a series of sermons aimed at answering fundamental questions about our life together. The questions are:

- Why Church?
- Why Westminster?
- Why Join?
- Why Give?
- Why Tithe?

In addressing the first question, I said that the “why” of church is *community*, but not simply the community we find among others of similar interest or disposition, but the community in which our worship, service, learning and relationships lead us to *develop* or *grow* in our Christian faith. The “why” of church is *community* which draws us *closer to God*.

To the second question, I said that the particular “why” Westminster offers within the greater “holy Catholic church” is traditional Protestant worship centered around thoughtful preaching and sacred music drawn from several genres across the centuries, as well as an intentional welcome we extend to people at different stages of faith and to people who bring to the church a variety of political and social viewpoints found in our city and nation at this point in our history.

Today, I want to ask: “Why Join?” “Why join a church?”

## I.

It some ways it is an odd question, or at least a question that does not relate to every Christian denomination.

- My understanding is that if you are born into a Roman Catholic family, and remain Catholic, when you move into a new neighborhood you are more or less assigned membership into the nearest parish.
- At the opposite end of Christianity, if you came into faith by accepting Christ as your Lord and Savior through a revival meeting – rural or urban, in-person or electronic – through a youth retreat or college campus ministry, your religious awakening or conversion may have occurred outside and unrelated to membership in any specific congregation.
- I am told that several “mega churches” across the country, in their focus on the “unchurched” or “seekers,” downplay traditional membership and even the collection of offerings so that people will not have to jump through any institutional hoops, like serving on committees, being an officer, making a financial commitment.

In the grand scheme of Christianity across centuries and continents, no one of these approaches is superior or inferior to our more structured and formal Presbyterian emphasis on “membership” in a local church. But because it is Westminster Presbyterian Church in which we are worshipping, and for whom I am spiritually responsible, I’d like to offer a basic understanding of what membership at its best means and involves.

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Several years ago, I made the acquaintance of a man and woman in their mid thirties. They were married to each other. Both worked in public service. They had tried to have children, but when they realized they were unable, they decided to become foster parents. The boy they were fostering when I knew them was a delightful and friendly child of eight, but he had significant mood swings which had rendered him a challenge to his biological parents, the state agency which oversaw his care, and the series of foster homes in which he lived. Yet after a few months, this couple had decided that they would like to adopt him. That process was nearing completion during the time I knew them prior to their move to another city.

They were a couple intensely committed to their Christian faith. Their faith was a major reason they were choosing to adopt a challenging child. But they were not members of a congregation. The man told me that they would choose a church, and attend every Sunday, but if the minister preached or taught something with which they significantly disagreed, or asked them to become involved in a leadership role, they would move on to another congregation. “We expect sound doctrine,” he said. “And we do not want to be involved in the politics of a congregation.” As strong as this couple were in their faith, and as wonderful as they were to the boy who so needed them, they never joined a church. They were, by their own choice, Christians without a community to call home.

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I realize their example is different from most of us. While we may share their sense that the internal politics of any church is something we’d prefer to avoid, and we may have some sense that we would not want to go to a church in which the preaching or teaching was absolutely not a fit for what we believe, most of us are more inclined to hold back from a church because of *mildness* or *tolerance* in our faith rather than *intensity* and *clarity*.

But what we may have in common with this couple is some sense that the faith we have – no matter how nascent or well-developed – *can* exist apart from the community created in its name, the church. While I do not want to deny that we can come to and even grow in faith apart from a congregational setting, I still want to offer three interrelated and ascending answers to the question: “Why join *a church*?” So here goes.

## II.

The first reason to join a church is that it represents a *change* we are making in our lives.

The passage we read from the Apostle Paul is one of many which describes a commitment to Christ as akin to *putting on an entirely new set of clothes*. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians:

*Let us... put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation... so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with [Christ].*

Paul was “especially fond” of the idiom of the putting on of clothing as a symbol of the change involved in making a commitment to Christ. The late Paul Minear writes:

For [Paul] the Christian has a single inclusive obligation: to *put on* the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14)...all who have been baptized have been *clothed* with Christ (Gal. 3:27)...The choice of clothing can...be described as the *works of darkness* or the *armor of light* (Romans 13:12), *nakedness* or *heavenly dwelling* (II Cor. 5:2-3), the *deeds of the night* or the *weapons for the day* (I Thess. 5:5-8), the *old [self]* or the *new [self]* (Col.3:9-11; Eph. 4:22-24).

Minear continues:

The clothing to be donned by the faithful is described as the armor of God: truth, righteousness, faith, the spirit...or less grandiosely, as deeds of compassion, kindness, meekness, and love (Eph. 6:11f.; Col. 3:12f). ...

...the choice of clothing is never...casual or incidental... When [we put on] love [we put on] the very image of [our] Creator, and the new nature is tantamount to membership in a new humanity where “Christ *is* all, and *in* all.”

Minear concludes:

Paul does not even hesitate to describe the *resurrection* of the dead... as mortal nature being *clothed* with immortality (I Cor. 15:51-54).<sup>1</sup>

When we join a church, we move from simply considering Christianity, visiting churches from time to time with friends, attending on holidays, baptisms or weddings or funerals, to *aligning* ourselves with *one* congregation – for better or worse – for worship, learning, service, life together. We are *planting* ourselves in the midst of a *particular* people at a *particular* time and place. We are making a change from being an onlooker, consumer, tourist, taste-tester, fair-weather fan, to making a commitment *to* Christ *in* and *through* the life of a congregation. Just as when we buy a new outfit, don a new uniform, dress up for a new occasion, our outward attire signifies an inner change on our part, a new or renewed commitment.

We join a church because we are putting on “the breastplate of faith and love,” “the helmet of hope for salvation,” “the whole armour of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (1960), 58-59.

### III.

The second reason we join a church – as I mentioned a few weeks ago – is *community*. We are choosing to live out the change we are making within a community of people who are making the same change.

In the passage we read today, Paul *hints* at community without dwelling on it. After calling the Thessalonians to “put on the breastplate of faith and love,” he adds: “Encourage one another...build up one another.” When we join ourselves to a congregation, we are asking the congregation “encourage” and “build us up” in the change we have made that has brought us to the congregation in the first place.

Richard Niebuhr once spoke of “*the three way conversation of [people] with God and with one another in [God’s] presence.*”<sup>2</sup> Our faith in God is not just a conversation between ourselves and God, as if we are Tevya stepping away from the action in *Fiddler on the Roof* and dialoguing with God. Rather, our faith is a “three way conversation” involving ourselves, our God, and the community in which we worship – all in the presence of God.

### IV.

The third reason we join a church is *challenge*. This cuts two ways.

When we join a congregation, we will likely meet people whom we so come to admire that we are challenged to become more like them.

I realized this many years ago through a long time member of a church I was serving. June Bradley was a quiet, white haired, recently widowed woman who nearly every day drove from her small, wood-frame home to the church in her rather rusty car.

- She would work in the food bank, the clothing closet, the meals program alongside and serving people who lived on the streets or in shelters nearby.
- She attended worship each Sunday, adult education beforehand, helped in the kitchen whenever there was funeral receptions, served on the stewardship committee.
- Legend had it – which she later confirmed as true – that she had been one of the first women elected to the Session forty years earlier and that when the Session had voted to ask the minister at the time to resign, she opposed the motion; but none of the men had the courage to convey the results of the vote to the minister so she volunteered.
- During my time in that congregation, she pledged to a building renovation campaign we were conducting \$12,000 of the \$36,000 she had remaining in a stock account.

At one point, the staff and leaders became worried about the number of people from the streets and shelters who were coming into the church for assistance, and we started researching security systems and devising emergencies procedures that would enable us to welcome people but ensure that our members felt safe. After one meeting I looked out the window and noticed June Bradley, helping into her rusted car, a homeless man who had come to the church several times. She took him home, fed him dinner, allowed him to stay with her a few days until a room became available at the shelter. Security procedures out the window!

It is tough when, as a minister, your members are more Christ-like than you are.

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<sup>2</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 2.

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But it is not just those to whom we *look up* in the congregation who challenge us to be more in our faith than we already are. It is also people with whom we sometimes would just as soon not *have* to deal.

- The difficult church member who seems to be in every group we are in
- The person who doesn't quite know when to stop talking
- The person who doesn't quite pick up on social cues, especially the ones we offer
- The person who seems to be all talk and no action
- The person whose bumper sticker never matches our own leading up to an election

The church is full of people who *challenge* us by not being *like us*, or at least not being like the way we perceive ourselves. But the challenge they offer can lead us to *grow* as well. We join a church because we are challenged by those we *admire* and by those we cannot *quite* manage to admire. We grow in our faith from both.

V.

Why join? Why join a church?

Three simple Cs:

- Change
- Community
- Challenge

Faith is “a three-way conversation between God, us, and one another” in the community of faith, which is the church.

Amen.