

"Grace and peace from God the Father and Jesus our Savior!"

Titus 1:4

SERMON THEME: "Come to Worship, Not 'To Church'!"

SERMON TEXT: Hebrews 12:22-24, 28 (Read first)

Dear People of God,

Everyone and anyone can come to church! Anyone off the street, any stranger, any person who is not a Christian, can come here to be with us. Nothing is to prevent a transient or criminal or member of a non-Christian group or sexual predator or atheist to sit in the pew with us. And this is as it should be! Everyone is most certainly welcome! We are glad for anyone who comes! This is a place for all sinners! Our doors are open to the community, to the whole world if only the people would come! God hates no one; He loves every person, cares about every soul! Our heavenly Father's sacrifice of His beloved Son was for all souls, every human being!

We don't come or not come because of who may be here, including the man in the pulpit! This kind of thinking betrays a wrong motivation. We come to *worship* our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, almighty God; we are here in obedience to the sabbath command, in other words, because we love the LORD God, want to hear Him speak, and honor Him with our singing, our praises, and our renewed commitment to spirit-filled service. Here, in this gateway to heaven (Genesis 28:17) we pray to our heavenly Father and He hears. It is here, and only here, that we can join with our brothers and sisters in Christ in partaking of Christ's Body and Blood in the Holy Supper. This follows our sincere confession of sin and hearing those blessed words of absolution, 'Your sins are forgiven!' And more, we enjoy, we look forward to, the fellowship of the saints, coming before the throne of grace with people we love, with fellow saints with whom we are going to spend eternity!

The question before us this morning is this: Have we come "to church", or have we come to *worship*? Just why are we here? People do, in fact, come for different reasons. The teenager might tell us she comes because here parents "make" her come. The transient might be here hoping he'll get a handout after the

service is over. There may be one who shows up occasionally thinking this will keep his membership active. Some may come with the idea that by keeping the sabbath command they will go to heaven, ignoring the truth that obedience to the law, or good works, doesn't save anyone. I was in a home in my first parish talking with a young couple, and commended them for being faithful in their worship attendance. The young husband quickly responded, "Yeah, I have to be there just to keep my wife from nagging me." He was not joking, as I was to learn. That story had a very happy ending as that young husband and father later gave his heart to Christ and became one of our most active members, including serving as treasurer of the congregation. In another situation, same parish, a member came begrudgingly to worship—in other words, simply came to church—following the death of his young daughter for which he blamed God. In time, he was healed and again came to worship from a loving and penitent heart.

Among those who come here to God's house there may well be one or more who has not come for the right reason. Some may not have a living faith, nor have ever really committed themselves to a Christ-like life. Their attendance may be hit and miss, which might indicate they have "come to church" when they are here, and not "to worship". Describing the visible church, our Catechism says this: "The visible church is the whole number of those who use the Word of God and profess the Christian faith, but among whom, besides the true Christians, there are also the hypocrites" (LSC p. 135). Just because a person is here in our midst doesn't mean he or she is saved. It is a mistake to assume that anyone belongs to the Lord; we cannot know the heart of another. Only God knows, and I emphasize, He DOES know!

There's another presence here, even now. You need not be frightened, but you do need to be on guard. From his standpoint, what better place for satan to be on the day of rest and worship, than in God's house? He need not concern himself with those who don't come here in obedience to the sabbath day commandment—they belong to him already. But when the devil comes to church—notice I said "to church"—then he can distract, plant seeds of doubt and complaint and boredom, and try to twist the truth of the message from God's holy Word!

Yes, anyone can come to church. But not everyone here has come to worship! *There is a world of difference between coming to church and coming to worship!* Hearts true to the Lord don't just come to church. They come to WORSHIP God! They come here for a glimpse of "Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"! We who have come to worship from the heart are here to heighten our anticipation of seeing the angels in festal gathering, and the patriarchs of old, and certainly our loved ones who have departed this life secure in the Lord! And most of all, we will see Jesus, Mediator of the New Covenant, and Friend and Savior in this life, and our eternal Lord!

When we keep the first and greatest commandment, loving our God as Jesus said to do, with "all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourselves" (Luke 10:27), then we are eager to come into His holy presence! We are here to give thanksgiving and praise for "receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken"! It is our joy to "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe" (v. 28)!

The word "worship" comes from the Greek *proskunew*. It means to kiss the hand of; to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead; to do homage, or make obeisance; to give adoration. In verse 28 the word *latreuomen* is used, meaning "in service to God; sacred service." That's why we often talk about worship as a "service". We come here to serve God; our worship is also an act of rendering a service. The Greek more literally says, "Let us who are moved by grace serve God well-pleasingly..." Every true believer knows that we are to be doing this every hour of every day; in the broad sense, worship summarizes Christian living. But today we're talking about the time spent in God's house where the focus is on our God and His Word, both Law and Gospel, and His sacraments. We come here to be fed the "pure spiritual milk" that we might "grow up to salvation" as Peter so descriptively puts it (1 Peter 2:2).

Here, publicly, together, we serve God by prostrating ourselves before Him, willingly yielding ourselves to His will, presenting ourselves as "living sacrifices", which Paul writes is our "spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1)! We come here reverently, humbly, unable to stand proud before His throne of grace! The entertain-

ment style of what is called worship in so many churches calling themselves "Christian" today is a far cry from the kind and nature of worship found in Scripture. We come in fear of God's judgment for impenitence, and in awe of His mercy as He forgives our sins for the sake of Jesus who died to pay the price for our transgressions with His very life!

We come to actively participate, to take part, to do collectively what we do privately during the week. And as we render this service most pleasing to God we are all built up, encouraged, prepared to withstand another week in a hell-bent world! Our sin-wearied souls rejoice together as we confess and God forgives, as we pray and our dear Lord hears and answers, as we sing and the sound of our voices glorifies our Father, Savior, and Holy Spirit! And as we offer the firstfruits of our increase for the support of Christ's mission on earth, we are given the assurance the Word of the Lord does not return void, but will accomplish the purpose for which He gave it (Isaiah 55:11)!

Speaking of the body of Christ, which is the church, you'll recall that Paul also spoke of our fellowship, our coming together in this way: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Corinthians 12:26). As we share in our conversations, and in our prayer time, we learn of those things that are needful in our midst, and our mutual care is also part of worship, a way of glorifying our Lord who is the Head of the body! When we're hurting, this is the place to come not only for godly consolation, but for the compassionate help of our brothers and sisters in Christ! To come to God's house late and leave early avoiding fellowship is not the way of worship.

We have not come here to be entertained. We have not come here to satisfy the flesh. We have come to receive the "Bread of Life" for the soul! Our aim is not to make the flesh feel good, or to have fun, but to edify the spirit within. True worship is sacrificial, spiritual, detached from the flesh, centered in Christ Jesus, uplifting and rejoicing in God's promises! We are reverent in the presence of God, awed by His divine grace, and humbly listen with the expectation of something good for our souls! We are here to learn how to carry on the work of Jesus, and be assured that the Holy Spirit will help us do it. Hopefully, everyone is here in this sacred hour to call on the name of the LORD, to tremble before

Him, and ascribe to Him honor and majesty and glory and strength! This is the essence of coming to worship! Just coming to church, putting in one's time, daydreaming during the liturgy, the sermon or prayers, anxious for it all to be over, is not worship; for such as these there is no blessing.

In His great mercy, almighty God lifted the curse of labor one day out of seven. He has provided a place and a preacher so we can come together and fall on our knees (I wish we did have kneelers to literally do that!) and offer ourselves to Him completely, in full surrender! This we do not because we have to, but because we want to! After all, God our Father sent His precious Son to atone for our sins; though innocent of sin, He took our sins upon Himself, and paid the penalty, namely death! Then He rose again to overcome the grave for us, and sent His Spirit to bring us to a living faith! So again the heart-felt words of our text, "...Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus offer to God acceptable worship!"

We who come to worship never tire of hearing how the Son of God was mercilessly nailed to a cross, and there gave His life for every sinner, worshiper or not. He "redeemed us from the curse of the law having become a curse for us..." (Galatians 3:13). How can we not be grateful?! Only the hardest of hearts would not want to bow down in humble worship, with reverence and awe!

One thing to keep in mind, our worship here is only a prelude to worshipping with all the hosts of heaven! Worship will be our chief activity in heaven! When God looks into the heart of the one going "to church", but not to *worship*, and sees the unbelief or the lukewarmness, what guarantee does that person have of going to heaven? God's the Judge, but He does make clear that unless the heart is in worship, there is no promise of eternal life in glory!

To help convey the truth of this meditation, we can all help by changing our language. Instead of saying, "Let's go to church", say "Let's go to worship"! This is a good way to witness to the truth of why we're here! And it's a good way to bring to mind what God has done through Christ Jesus to save us! To Him "be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority...now and forever!" (Jude v. 25). In Jesus' name, Amen.

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The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Rev. Donald P. Tonack