

“You should wear your seatbelt.”

Not a very scandalous saying is it? It’s generally accepted truth. I suppose the rebels are out there, but how many of them truly disagree with the saying? I think they’d agree even if they just get too busy, got out of the habit, or are trying to make a point or something. I suppose someone could say, “I don’t use a seatbelt because I ride the bus!” That’s fair, don’t have a seatbelt to put on if that’s the case. Or the action hero, desperate to save a life, maybe he doesn’t click his seatbelt in. So, I guess when you dig deep enough you could find some valid exceptions to the seatbelt rule. But do those exceptions nullify it? No. If possible, where possible, you should wear your seatbelt. Not too controversial.

How about, “You should go to Church”?

Now don’t panic! If you haven’t been to Church in years, don’t feel singled out. And if you haven’t missed a Sunday outside of the pandemic, don’t get all high and mighty. Let’s just remain calm, even as we embrace the irony of me saying “You should go to Church” to a mostly empty Church, and a camera.

“You should go to Church,” what a scandalous statement in Modern Christianity! “It’s sanctimonious, it’s unwelcoming.” And it may be in certain contexts, but let’s, just like the seatbelt question, ponder: is it generally true? And we know the exceptions, “I work,” “it’s my only day to sleep in,” “that place is full of hypocrites,” “that pastor is out of touch,” “they voted to replace my great aunt’s piano,” “The weather was too nice,” “The weather was too bad,” “I’m not feeling well,” “I just don’t *feel it* with that music,” and of course, the tried and true, “There is a global pandemic going on!” And some of these are quite compelling, so much that we switch to recordings like this one to accommodate people, offer different service times, and pastors go see

the shut-ins. But much like someone riding the bus doesn't nullify the general rule that wearing a seatbelt is a good idea, do our exceptions and situations, which may be valid, nullify the general rule that you should go to Church? I don't think it does.

Curious, I think, is that what lies behind our exceptions to not come to Church, is a theological, yes, a theological, doctrinal conclusion: "You don't have to go to Church to be a Christian."

And, praise God, it's pretty true! Which is why you will be hard pressed to find one of us stick-in-the-mud pastors hunting down the summer travelers to yell at them, looking down on the "once-a-monthers," or threatening the sick with leans if they don't get their offering in! So, yes, you have got us pastors theologically pinned down, we must tap out and cry, "Mercy!" Because putting your backside in a pew doesn't give you salvation. Having faith in the risen Lord does.

Our first reading today is about a whole bunch of people who had faith in the risen Lord. They had seen Jesus die, then many had seen him alive again! What an amazing month that must have been, more significant than even our past month here. And so what do these Christians, made so not by Church attendance, but by faith in Jesus who died and rose for them, what do they do? They go to Church. "They devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers." Those are a few things we do here on Sundays. Then there are verses 46 and 47: "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Why would they do such things? They didn't *have* to! They had seen the Lord, they had more than any of us could ever wish for! No service, no matter the music, could ever match that

feeling! No sinful pastor or apostle could ever be as good as the Good Shepherd himself! Why would they go listen to *someone else*? Sing *those* songs? They didn't *have* to – but they still did.

And this reading makes that church seem perfect, but it wasn't. Because even that early Church is full of sinners and hypocrites. Just 3 chapters from this text a few of the members aren't giving their fair share. Later in chapter 15 the apostles themselves have disagreements. Then you read the letters to the Corinthians and, my goodness, that Church was full of sinners! Yet the continual refrain of these with faith in Jesus was to meet, learn, and celebrate when possible.

But why did they gather? Why should we when we are able to again? We don't *have* to. We got me, my screen, and Jesus. Why deal with those other sinners? We got Bibles; we can pray. So why does the author of Hebrews right in chapter 10: “Don't get in the habit of not meeting together?” Is he just being mean? Has the youth soccer league stolen all his kids from his service?

I saw a little image online, it said something to the effect of, “A Christian being in Church doesn't make them Christian just like a car being in a garage doesn't make it a car.” And again, “You got me!” The building doesn't make a car a car, and this one doesn't make the people in it Christians. But that meme resonated with me, because, as I thought about it: No, a garage doesn't make a car a car, but why do we have so many garages with cars in them? Why does insurance charge you less if you park your car in one each night? What are the benefits of a garage? Shelter from sun and storm, safety from thieves, and what if you need a tune up? Where can you change the oil? In a garage.

So why should you go to Church? Why should you sit through this video if you haven't turned it off yet? Why have Christians, since these first ones in Jerusalem for thousands of years, through dictators, through plagues, through persecution, through apathy, still gathered together? Because in the Church (where we hear the Word of God, the teaching of the apostles; where the bread is broken that is the body of Christ; where our prayers for each other and the world are lifted up together; where our praises join together before God who has promised to be where two or more are gathered) - because where all that happens - is where you find forgiveness, life and healing in Jesus. It is where he has promised to be in a special way.

Jesus is at your home, sure, but here, you have to try to avoid him! This is where you find the Good Shepherd in a very real way. It is where you find safety from the thieves who, like Jesus tells us in our gospel lesson, seek to break into the sheepfold, the Church, and kill, destroy, and lead away. Yes, he has his Sheep in a pen, not to oppress them, but because sheep on their own, individually, don't last long.

Here is where we get tune ups. Yes, we say that same confession and creed, but it's a continual reminder of who we are, we can be honest - we are sinners and hypocrites, we don't have to pretend here at church - it's why we need to go to Church, because then we hear the beautiful reminder of who we trust in: true God come to die and rise to wash us clean and give us life eternal. We are in the world so many hours a day, like a car being hit by the sun day in and day out, here we find shelter in the shade of our Risen Lord.

And so just as American Christianity's kryptonite to us pastors, "You don't have to go to Church to be a Christian," is a theological conclusion, so also my general statement, "You should go to

Church,” is theological. The Word of God does what it says, and Jesus promises to be where his people are gathered and present in His Body and Blood. And that is a blessing to partake of, to be with other sheep of the pasture, celebrating the forgiveness and victory won by the Good Shepherd. And as American Christianity dies, perhaps putting backsides in pews again, when it’s reasonable and safe, could be more than just sanctimonious or social status. Perhaps it can be a confession that we long and publicly seek the Word of God, the Sacraments, the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ, and the ability to do work for the Kingdom of God.

Let’s be honest, even for you regular attenders, does life ever get a little busy for that devotion somedays? Come here, we can do it together. And how much more can we do! Jesus says, “take eat, take drink, this is my body, this is my blood.” You do that at home? Or “go and baptize all nations”? But together we can! Not to mention, how the Church builds hospitals, we help the needy, we build schools, like ours, we raise support for missionaries, so that more may join us day by day, just like in Acts. That’s hard to do as an individual Christian. But together, as a bunch of sinners, but sinners united under the cross of Christ, we can. God can.

And so whether you use a seatbelt or not. Whether you have been here often or not at all. I hope you know us pesky pastors aren’t just trying to guilt trip, we are trying to lift up the beautiful promises of God and deliver them. We are trying to be faithful to the Good Shepherd who told Peter to feed his lambs, and sometimes we have to go outside of normal means to do that, that’s OK, let us know if that is a need you have, we make visits not to ostracize, but to include. But God gave that “honor the sabbath day” commandment for a reason, he raises up church leaders for a reason, he tells us to meet together for a reason. To keep and guard us lest we look up one

day and we haven't heard a good word, a forgiving word, a word of the Shepherd in months or years and we are kind of lost and surrounded by distractions and depression. So, God made a Church for a reason.

The Church, capital C, isn't a building, not even a Synod, it's all believers. But, just like in our reading, believers gather around the word and gifts of God. And yeah, this Church full of sinners has some divisions that aren't good. So we seek unity, but also the truth. And we want to faithfully present that to you. So we can show you the clearest picture of Jesus, the Risen Lord who wants you to hear his voice, so he can strengthen you through the excuses, apathy, sin, doubt, and death, and be with you, here and now in real ways, and even more in eternity.

I don't know, maybe a pastor talking about church in a pandemic is off base, maybe I come off as a car salesman, but I hope we can at least appreciate that the people in Acts and Christians for thousands of years knew it wasn't all snake oil. And maybe one day I'll be able to articulate it so it doesn't feel like a guilt trip. But God has a good word for you. In a bad-news world he has good news of forgiveness in his blood, and life in his resurrection. He wants the world, and you, to know it. In the name of the Risen Lord. Amen.