

The Importance of Gathering as the Church

Sermon September 11, 2022

Scripture reading: Psalm 84 and Psalm 65:1-5

Golden verse: *How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty!*

My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. - Psalm 84:1-2

Dear beloved,

We live in a quickly changing world. The norms are changing, the expectations are changing, and our lifestyles are changing as well.

Years ago, we only paid with cash or cheque. For years now, we have been paying with credit cards. Today, we can pay from our computers, cell phones or Apple watches!

Years ago, we attended church services if we wanted to connect with God and our friends. The pandemic isolated us, and we were afraid to infect others or to get infected. The pandemic years changed our habits in many ways. Many people work from home, and they don't have to go into their office anymore. Somebody told me that, in a building where years ago more than 700 people gathered daily, in the last two and half years only about 17 people show up on a daily base.

A few years ago, we were happy to gather Sunday by Sunday at the church.

These days, many people feel more comfortable staying in their pajamas and worshipping in front of a computer screen or through their phones.

And, if we are totally open, we can tell that worshipping through Zoom or live streaming can be more comfortable. We don't have to get up an hour earlier to prepare ourselves for church, we don't have to drive, and we don't have to sit for an hour in a less-than-comfortable pew.

We can just stay in the bed or gather with others in the family room in pajamas, sipping a cup of coffee or having some snacks. We can still talk to each other and, if needed, we can let the dog out. Our dog can even sit on our lap as we are gathering as a family.

We are so used to this worship style that many of us feel more comfortable following the service through our devices from home, from a cottage, from a hotel room, or wherever we are. We still feel part of that group; however, physically we are not connected.

Since the churches are open again, often we convince ourselves that we don't have an opportunity to gather at the church because ... and here we start our excuses: I don't feel like showering in the morning; I don't feel like fixing my hair; I don't feel like shaving; I don't feel like socializing today since I didn't sleep well; I can have a longer Sunday morning rest, and I will start my computer shortly before the service starts.

Once, I tried to convince someone to come and worship with us in person. The answer was: "I am following the service on Zoom. Why should I be there in person? Just because the minister wants to see one more person in the pews?"

To gather together with the saints to worship God is not only vitally important for our spiritual health, but also for our identity as members of Christ's body.

When we gather for public worship on a Lord's Day morning, we are – among other things – declaring the worth and value with which we esteem God.

When we leave our comfort, our work, and our other pleasures behind, and we make the effort to gather at the church, we declare that God is more worthy of our time than anything else, including work, sports, or even sleep. Covid has not changed God's worth.

What is the importance of gathering in the church?

Many of us have been told we can worship God anywhere and at any time; Jesus says as much in John 4:21. Indeed, for the Christian, all of life is worship:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 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" (Romans 12:1–2).

In July, while traveling in Hungary, Austria, and Switzerland, I saw that the churches remained open as the church members kept their safe distance. For this, the churches are not as destroyed as here in Canada. After the pandemic, the churches in Europe mostly are flourishing, and here in Canada, we are dying. In Europe, in most cases, the attendance is 15% less, but here in Canada 2/3 of the members still did not return to worship in the church in person. Please don't ask me what our problem is because I won't be able to answer this question.

In Canada, there are still church leaders who have decided it is not worth the risk to gather for the public worship of God. I am not saying this with judgment, or to start any argument about who is right and who is wrong. I am just mentioning this as information.

Some statistics said that, in North America, by the end of this year, more than 20% of the churches might close because a lack of financial support or because members will still be afraid to gather in person.

To gather, to worship in person, is a vital aspect not only of our identity but also of our functioning as a community and as God's people.

Using modern technology such as Zoom, live streaming, and YouTube is an absolutely awesome opportunity. However, the main danger is that this can be our new norm, our new habit, and for this, we will start to neglect to meet together, we won't have an opportunity to encourage one another, and we will withdraw from the community. It is not the same to get a hug from another person and to hug our computer screen.

As Christians, gathering together with our Christian fellows and worshipping our God together with one voice is not only vitally important for our spiritual health, but also for our own well-being and identity as members of Christ's body. I read that in some congregations, that suspended public worship services for a short period of time, their church leaders were careful not to call the livestream services "worship services" because they thought those were not services of corporate worship. Those events were called "supplement worship time" because, as they said, a livestream cannot replace or substitute for the corporate worship of the church.

Gathering for worship is worth the risk.

Safety is number ONE. We are always at risk. Knowing that our lives are constantly in danger, we should not just lock ourselves in the house not doing anything. We have to continue to live our lives as we did before the pandemic. Otherwise, mentally, we will continue to damage ourselves enormously.

Fear is an emotional response, but most of the time we are experiencing fear because we are imagining danger. This can grow and develop into mental health conditions including panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, and phobias when people will be afraid to socialize or gather in the church.

These days, people gather with their family members with who knows how many people in a room, they shop in the malls, and they attend sports events in arenas where people are sitting touching each other's shoulders. But, being afraid of getting the virus, the only thing they neglect is the church, where people can still distance safely, if necessary. These days, I think even the devil is using the pandemic against us to keep us away from the church: go shopping, go to see your friends, go wherever you want, but don't go to church.

We have to remember what Psalm 31:15a says: "*My times are in Your hands*". Not a virus, not a famine, not an earthquake, but God holds my life in His hands.

We are constantly surrounded by risky and dangerous situations, but we don't see them. When we drive, so many problems could happen to us, but we still drive. When we go shopping so many issues could happen such as tornados, and earthquakes, the building can collapse, but we still go shopping. When I drive in my area, I frequently see deer crossing the road. Those moments make me more cautious as a driver.

If we allow fear to rule our lives, we will kill our joy and our happiness, and we won't be able to enjoy life. The fear will create more fear in us. The fear will make us feel lonely and isolated, and this will harm us mentally in an enormous way.

In the current public health situation, we evaluate our risks. The risk news is changing almost daily.

I want to encourage you to solemnly evaluate your risk assessment and risk tolerance to consider whether they are in line with Christian values and Christian duty. We have always done this. Previously we had to ask ourselves: is worship worth the risk of contracting a cold, pinkeye, or the flu?

We must remind ourselves repeatedly what Psalm 31:15a says: "*My times are in Your hands*". To word it personally: my life is in God's hands. He created me, He keeps my life in His hands. He cares for me. He knows when and in which way He wants to end my life and call me home. I can die in a car accident, but this will not stop me from driving. I can die in an airplane crash, but this won't keep me back from flying. I can die because of a flu virus, but I won't totally isolate myself from people. I live my life mindfully, I am cautious, but I am not afraid to live a happy and joyful life.

I know that it is "*better to spend a day in Your house than 1,000 days elsewhere.*"
Psalm 84:10a

I am happy to gather with you in person, so come and join us in person, giving you a chance to feel our love and share with us your love. Amen