
Why Go To Church?

A sermon by Canon George Maxwell
Proper 13 – Year B

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)

Why go to church?

I had a chance to visit Boston this summer with my wife, Mary Hunter, and our son, Robert.

We loved Boston. It's a great city to walk around. And, the weather was perfect while we were there.

So, every morning, we got up and made a long list of things to do.

We rode on the Swan Boats. We trekked parts of the Freedom Trail. We took a duck tour. We walked along the river. We jumped around on every splash pad. We played on every playground. We even went down a zip line.

There were the inevitable moments of tension when it became apparent that we were trying to do too much.

Fortunately, Mary Hunter had prepared for this. She carried a large grey shoulder bag that she had packed with all of the water, fruit, and forbidden snacks that we would need to survive these moments.

We called it Mama's bag.

When I began to look a little bit like Betty White in the famous Snickers bar commercials, out from Mama's bag would come just the thing that I needed.

When Robert, who is only six, would get a little frustrated with whatever I was trying to overcomplicate, out from Mama's bag would come just the thing that he needed.

We ended the first day by crossing over the Charles River and into Cambridge so that we could walk around Harvard Square.

We also decided that what we really wanted ... actually, I decided that what we really wanted ... was to join the monks at the Episcopal monastery for their Compline service.

The challenge is that service doesn't start until 8:30 p.m. and it's a little different than the Compline service by the lake at Kanuga!

We explained to Robert how important silence is to the monks. We told him that there would be large periods of silence in the service. We also told him that the psalms would be chanted very slowly and very softly. We told him that this is how the monks listened to God.

Robert said that he understood all of this, so we walked into the chapel. We sat outside of the choir, where the monks and

retreat guests had gathered because, well, we were still a little anxious about disturbing the worship in such a contemplative setting.

We were anxious, but Robert was fine.

When the service began, we were responding too quickly, jumping the silences, but Robert was observing them as if he had done this many times before.

We were chanting the psalms a little too forcefully, but Robert seemed to know instinctively that they were being offered as prayer.

I realized as I watched him that he had assumed a posture of wonder and curiosity and was totally engaged in the service.

Everybody else saw it too.

At the end of the service, one of the monks began gently to sprinkle water on those who had gathered for the service.

When the monk got to Robert, though, he didn't just sprinkle water on him. The monk broke into a large grin and practically gave Robert a bath!

After the service, the monk came back to explain to Robert why he had done what he had done. The water was a sign, he said, that Robert had been blessed by God.

Other people introduced themselves to us as well. We talked with people from remarkably different places and walks of life. We all felt drawn to each other, at least in that moment, by the experience of having been in the presence of God.

I'm struck, and maybe you will be too when you think about it, by how many of my most powerful memories of church are of worship.

I remember, for example, an Easter Vigil when we watched the baptism of a man and his grandson at the same time.

I remember a wedding in which two friends of mine came together to celebrate their future life together.

I remember a funeral where we all cried over the premature death of a member of our youth group and another one where we all celebrated the life of an iconic parishioner who had been sick for a long time.

In each of these moments, we gathered together and became something bigger than ourselves. We allowed ourselves to be drawn out of ourselves and into the presence of God.

These were moments in which we not only learned about God, we also experienced God.

But it's work. Worship is work.

In the Gospel passage we just heard, Jesus is trying to explain what kind of work worship requires. He is trying to explain what it takes to actually experience God.

You will remember that we are reading through the sixth chapter of John.

Last Sunday, Jesus performed the miracle of transforming five barley loaves and two fish into enough food to feed 5,000 people. Everyone ate enough to be satisfied and there were still 12 baskets of bread left over. The crowd was amazed. Jesus sensed that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, so he withdrew to the mountain by himself.

The disciples went on ahead of Jesus to the other side of the lake. The crowd followed. When Jesus appeared the next day, the crowd is waiting on him, wanting more of what they just had.

You are here, Jesus says, because you ate all you wanted to eat yesterday. But, it was a sign, and not just a miracle. You don't understand the work that needs to be done.

The crowd seems to be willing to go where Jesus wants to lead them. "What is the work?" they ask.

The work is not something you can do by yourself. It's not about you making something happen. It's not about you becoming more of who you already are.

The work is something that you have to allow God to do with you. It's about you allowing God to make something happen through you. It's about you becoming a new person.

The work is more than just learning about God; it's about experiencing God.

And, this kind of work is work that we have to do together.

Let me give you an example.

Think of our worship here as theater.

The actors are not just those of us who are vested, standing in front of the altar as if on a stage. We are not performing so that you can watch, waiting to be entertained or educated in some special spiritual way.

There is no room for God in that arrangement.

We are all actors in the drama together. It would be a great mistake to act the drama as if you were alone.

There are leaders, of course, and we are vested. But, that's only because the logistics of worship require some leadership.

The choir is not performing the hymns. The choir is leading all of us in the singing of hymns.

The preacher is not just dispensing wisdom. The preacher is trying to lead all of us into the presence of God.

Working together in this way allows us to actually experience God together.

I find that worship works best when we can see it through the eyes of a child; that is, worship works best when we can approach it from a perspective of wonder and curiosity.

That's the best posture it seems to prepare us to be drawn out of ourselves and into the presence of God.

What if, for example, you found yourself thinking ... "you know, I'm a little bit crazy"?

You might look around you and think ... "and these people, they are a little bit crazy too."

The next thing you know, you might find yourself saying ... "you know, I'm difficult to live with at times."

And, then you might look around you and think ... "and these people, they are difficult to live with at times too."

Even this little bit of honesty with yourself might encourage you to be a bit more honest with those people around you.

And, as you reveal more of yourself to them, you might find that the love they give you in return is deeper and more meaningful because, when you think about it, it is actually more about who you really are and less about the false face of perfection that you had been holding up in front of them.

Now, you're on to something!

This is what it feels like to be drawn out of yourself and into the presence of God.

This is the work of worship.

It can be frightening, though, to step out from behind the mask that you have so carefully constructed.

Annie Dillard, one of my favorite writers, says that if we really understood what was going to happen in worship, then the ushers would be handing out hard hats and life preservers instead of smiles and bulletins.

I actually like the way Yo-Yo Ma, the great cellist, describes it a little bit better.

Yo-Yo Ma says,

While I'm on stage, you are all my guests, because that's sort of the unsaid agreement. While you're my guest, if something bad happens on stage, I often think of Julia Child (and here he mimics Julia Child's voice), "Oh, the chicken's fallen on the floor! Yes. Oh, well pick it up and put it right back." And you know what? Everybody's with you.

Everybody's with you, he says, because he's not there to prove anything. He's there to share something. Everyone is there to share something with each other.

They are all there to commune with each other.

We might say that they are all there to enter into communion with each other.

The fruit of this work is the community that it forms.

Unlike the other groups, clubs, and associations we join, a worshipping community is not defined by any common characteristic other than the shared desire to participate in the life God.

It does not shape its identity on the basis of wealth, or age, or sex, or gender, or class, or any common social, economic, or political interests.

It reaches across all of those boundaries to draw us out of the world that we have created and into the presence of God where we can experience eternal life.

And, once we have experienced the presence of God, we are better able to return to the world and find God in it. We are better able to serve as instruments of God to reconcile the world to the divine self.

And that is why you go to church.

You don't go to church just to learn about God.

You go to church to experience God, so that you can bring that experience back into the world and lead others into the life of God.

Why go to church?

You go to church because in the end you will become what you worship.

Genuine experiences of God change us. Like falling in love, worship gives us new eyes to see the world. It transforms us over time into new people capable of living in a new creation.

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Lord, give us this bread always.

Amen.