

The Nurturing Community
Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 20-25; Acts 2:37-47

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and the prayers...
All who believed were together... Day by day,
as they spent much time together in the temple...*

There is a pervasive misperception in our culture
that a person can be a Christian and not go to church.
We live in a generation of believers-but-not-belongers,
people who accept the notion that God exists
people who pray on occasion, even very regularly,
people who may even believe that the things Jesus taught were true,
even that Jesus was who he claimed to be,
but people who have no desire to gather together regularly
with others who believe.

These religious lone rangers, many of them very good people,
usually have worked out some argument against organized religion...

"I can pray at home," they say,
"or at the office, or in the car, or on the golf course,
just as easily as I can pray in a church building."
"And besides," they reason, "I feel God's presence more
when I am outdoors in nature,
or when I'm reading a book, or looking at art, or exercising my body."
These are more spiritually uplifting for me
than when I am sitting in a sanctuary with people all around.

Now, it's true that people can have spiritual experiences of many kinds
outside of the church.

But this kind of spirituality should not be confused with
a genuine Christian experience.

From the biblical perspective, the very thought of having Christian faith
apart from participation in the church, in the body of Christ,
is inconceivable.

From the biblical perspective, belonging to the body of Christ means
active participation in an actual, flesh-and-blood group of Christians
who gather to worship and pray,
to break bread together,
to study the scriptures together,
and to engage in the work of Christ
in the world.

These are the practices by which we can identify the Christian church.
Apart from these practices,
while a person may have a genuine and meaningful spiritual life,
it cannot be a Christian spiritual life,
in any biblical sense.

Imagine the people of Israel after their journey through the wilderness,
standing on the sands of the desert,
about to cross the Jordan River into the land of Canaan.

Imagine Moses standing before them, and saying...

“Oh, there really isn’t any need to stay together. Just disburse and intermingle and live where you like, and find what religious experiences you like. To each his (or her) own. I think we’ll be able to remember what God did for us and what God told us pretty well without getting together too often. Maybe once or twice a month is enough. And then just for an hour. Just try to be a good person and you’ll be fine.”

Had this been their approach to maintaining their identity God’s people,
Israel would likely have disappeared within only a few generations.
Yet isn’t this often our approach?

And do we not live in a culture today that, in many ways,
is just as contrary to our Christian beliefs
as Canaanite religion was to Israel?

Moses knew that the people who lived in the land across the Jordan
did not hold the faith of Israel dear in their hearts.

Why should they? They were Canaanites, not Israelites.

Israel, who confessed that *“the Lord is our God, the Lord alone,”*
was going to live among a people who worshipped many gods
and who lived by a completely different set of standards.

Israel was entering the land of Canaan to be a counter-cultural community.

So Moses urged the people...

“Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Recite them to your children and talk about them

when you are at home and when you are away,

when you lie down and when you rise.

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

and write them on the doorposts of your house

and on your gates.

Moses knew that nurturing faith, in the face of an adverse culture,
was a matter of life and death for the people.

Christian Educators tell us

(and we should thank God for our church’s Christian Educators!)

how important it is for Christian people, children and adults alike

to have the opportunity to speak about their faith on a regular basis.

They remind us that people on remember only about 10% of what they hear...

...as in this sermon that you’re hearing today – 10%...

But people remember about 90% of what they speak.

So it seems that modern scientific studies of the human mind are confirming
the ancient wisdom of the people of God which urged,

“Keep these words...Recite them to your children...Talk about them...

talk about them all the time, everywhere you go...Talk about your faith.. ...talk

about these words that I am commanding you.”

And Moses wasn’t just commanding those who felt confident enough
to do public speaking,

or whose arms were easily twisted to teach Sunday School,

or to help with Israel’s midweek after-school program,

Moses meant that every person who belonged to the house of Israel,
everyone who believed that *"the Lord is our God"*
should talk about his or her faith.

Now, today, we live in a land of professionals, experts, and specialists.
We hire accountants to do our taxes for us,
lawyers to handle our legal affairs,
doctors to cure our diseases,
financial planners to help us invest our money.
In this setting it would be tempting to believe
that we should hire a seminary-trained, professional religious talker
to talk about the faith *for us*.
But that would be to misunderstand the nature of the Christian church.
You don't need a seminary degree
to do what Moses commands the people to do.
You don't have to be versed in lots of biblical technicalities.
I've been with you all enough over the summer to know
that you have what it takes to talk about your faith.
Because I've been with you enough to begin hearing your stories.
You've spoken your stories to me. You've told me...
Stories about this church, and people who have made it strong.
Stories about your families...parents and grandparents,
and the faith they held dear.
Stories about what happened the other day in the grocery store
that made you realize that God is with you every moment.
Stories about the time you lost your job, and what you learned.
Stories about the thing your child said that
made you realize how much you love her,
and opened your eyes to see life differently.
You are really good at telling stories –
the trick is, remembering that God is part of those stories.
And that your story is part of the larger story that God is telling.
That's what it means to talk about your faith.

Moses said,
*When your children ask you in time to come,
"What is the meaning of [all this] the Lord your God has commanded you?"
then you shall [tell a story] to your children,
"We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt
with a mighty hand..."*
We were dead in sin,
but God has made us alive in Christ Jesus.
We had no hope,
but Jesus opened our eyes to God's future.
Our lives had no meaning and we were living in darkness,
but listen to how the light shined down
and we discovered God's purpose for our lives.

* * * * *

When God breathed out the Holy Spirit upon the disciples at Pentecost

and called the church into existence,
a community was formed.

A community not unlike the one that crossed over the Jordan River
into the land of Canaan.

A community called together by a common story
about a man who was the Son of God
and who died on a cross and was raised on the third day.

And the book of Acts tells us about
what it took for this community to hold together,
what it took for this community to grow together in their common faith:

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers...
All who believed were together... Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple...*

Being a member of the church means a complete immersion in a way of life,
an immersion into a community that changes its members lives,
a community that seeks to define itself
in the midst of a world that knows nothing about
who or what the body of Christ is.
a community that devotes itself to learning to tell
(not just to hear, but to tell)
the story of what God is doing in Jesus Christ.
a community of people who choose not to do
some of the things they could do (even good things)
so that they have time and energy to devote
to being the body of Christ.
Often these are hard choices!

Today in this community of faith,
in our own expression of the body of Christ at Glenshaw Presbyterian Church,
we are blessed to have a whole host of disciples
who have made, and are making, that choice weekly, even daily.

Disciples who have heard the call of Jesus Christ
and felt the leading of the Spirit of God to gather together
in classrooms to teach and to learn,
in a choir loft to sing (and a choir room to practice),
in a meeting room to plan for ministry,
and in the pews to open their lips in praise to God.

That is, to participate in the practices that make our congregation
a place where Christian faith is nurtured and people's lives transformed.

And don't be fooled.
It's not just the children and youth who will grow from this kind of nurturing.
It is the whole community of God's people,
as we learn together to tell the story of what God is doing in our midst.

* * * * *

Now let us stand and tell that story
in the words of the Apostles' Creed.