

WHY I GO TO CHURCH

A sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell

The First Parish Church in Weston
Unitarian Universalist
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Weston, Massachusetts
www.firstparishweston.org

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A sermon delivered by the Rev. Jeffrey Barz-Snell at the First Parish Church in Weston.

Opening Meditation:

“What matters most is not when we die but how we live.”

~ Michel de Montaigne

“Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry, and give back.”

– Dag Hammarskjöld.

Readings : Psalm 1
Luke 12 :22-31

I want to begin this morning by thanking you for your warm welcome to Weston over the last several weeks. My family and I moved here a little over three weeks ago, and we have very much appreciated your words of welcome and outright hospitality. It's a big deal to move someplace new after 20 years.

I also have to say that I have experienced something over the last two months that perhaps some of you can relate to. It is a conversation that could probably only happen here in Massachusetts. At least three times I have had the experience of telling someone I was moving to Weston only to be met with silence for a moment. In each case the person then replied, “Weston where?” “The western part of the state?” The third time it happened, I thought I must be a long-lost Abbot and Costello routine. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Massachusetts accent is alive and well! So we are glad to be here in Wes-TON, and I am very excited to walk with you and work together during First Parish's new chapter in your long history.

As for this morning, I want to begin by describing a social science study from 50 years ago. It was during the 1960's that this somewhat unusual and thought-provoking social experiment took place. *Unusual*, I suppose, because the subjects were not mice or rats or even just typical people. They were seminarians – students studying for the ministry. *Thought provoking* because of how these students responded during this experiment.

Social science researchers were interested in the way that our perception of time and urgency affects our moral decision-making. So they went to a seminary and, with the help of a professor, asked a number of students to prepare sermons on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. You remember the story: it's the one Jesus tells about a man traveling along a road who is robbed, beaten up, and left to die by bandits. Jesus tells us that the first person to come along, a priest, simply ignored the poor man and continued along his way. A second person then came along, a lawyer, and he too turned his gaze away and did not stop to help. Finally, a third man came along, a Samaritan. And he, he chose to stop and help the man.

Well, these researchers devised an experiment that would test what seminary students might do in a similar situation. The unknowing students were asked to prepare a sermon on this famous parable. They were each told that their sermon would not be publicly delivered, but that they would have to come to their professor's office to tape record it so that it could be graded later. The researchers divided up the students into three groups. One group was called on a certain morning and told that they could come at any point during the day to record their sermon. A second group was called and told that they needed to be there in the next few hours. And a third group was told that they had to come immediately to their professor's office to record their sermon.

Meanwhile, the social researchers had another part of this experiment. They arranged that as each student arrived at the building where the sermons were to be recorded, they would find someone lying on the ground by a bench near the entrance, seemingly unconscious and in need. They then observed how various students from the three groups responded.

The results were what we might anticipate. Among all those seminarians preaching sermons on the Parable of the Good Samaritan, barely one-third took the time to stop and do anything for the person lying unconscious on the ground. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who did stop, the researchers discovered, were mainly the ones who had been told that they could come any time that day. It was this group who did not feel overwhelmed with deadlines and overcrowded with schedules.

It is a funny thing about human nature. When we begin to get stressed and feel in a hurry, we can get lost in our own little agendas and dramas and not pause, if only for a moment, to see what is going on around us. We can get so caught up in the urgency of our own lives that we can begin to forget about what is really important to us – what values we want to follow in our own lives. We confuse urgency with importance.

It's interesting: we live during an unprecedented era of human history. There are so many labor-saving devices and technologies that many of us take for granted. Instead of stopping at a phone by the side of the road, we simply pull out our cell phone while driving, even though we know we shouldn't! Instead of sending a letter – what we now call “snail mail” – we shoot out a quick email or a text, if you are under the age of 35. We have wireless hotspots and Facebook and Twitter and Instagram and LinkedIn, and any number of personal and professional voice-mail accounts, all in the name of saving us time, allowing us to connect, and making us more productive. And the funny thing is, as we use more and more time-saving technologies, most of us seem to have less and less time. We all seem to be increasingly in a hurry.

Add on to this the fact that the almighty market has gradually encroached into more parts of our lives. This mentality is both seductive and all-encompassing. Access to information is not always a good thing. How many of us check our portfolios on a daily basis? How many of us who are seemingly comfortable still seem to worry about money more than anything else? There is enormous pressure from the media and from society to buy, to upgrade, to improve, to get the next new thing, to move up, to keep up with the Joneses.

And amidst all this consumerism and business, you hear a whole variety of people expressing a similar sentiment: *I don't need to go to church. Church is boring. Church is what my parents or grandparents do, or did. No, I'd rather sleep in and read the “Times” and maybe take a ride on the bike or a walk in the woods. That is where I feel closest to God anyway. I guess I am more spiritual than religious...* I am sure none of us has ever heard someone we know say something like that before...

Well, this morning I would like to suggest to you that there are some very good reasons to go to church, reasons that have to do with much of what I have been talking about. And please humor me, since most of you here this morning are not really my intended audience. Most of you here come to church. If I were just talking to you, I would be preaching to the converted. No, the people I am after this morning are all the people that each of us knows who don't come to church and who don't see the need for gathering as we do here on a Sunday morning. If anything, my mission this morning is to motivate some of you to respond to a few of those people we all know. I am hoping that maybe – just maybe – I can persuade you to at least share with a few of those folks who are sympathetic to the spiritual life but don't see the need for church – why you go to church.

Now, I know each of you has a whole variety of reasons why you come here on a regular basis on Sunday morning. I know because for years, I have asked people during new-member orientation classes why they come to church and which part of the service they like the most. The responses

are always varied and understandable. Some people attend for the opportunity to sit quietly, if only for an hour. Some attend for a few moments of peace and quiet and can't wait until the kids are excused after the Time for All Ages. Those people often fall into the category of parents, incidentally. Some attend for the music and the liturgical elements. Some attend because they like the Passing of the Peace and the opportunity to greet others and make a connection. Others attend to help out and contribute to a community. Some of you, dare I say, even attend because you want to hear a sermon, some words and ideas that will get your mind thinking and spirit stirring. Some attend to worship something actually greater than themselves. And there are other reasons. Each of you, I know, has your own ideas and agendas for this time on Sunday morning, as well you should in an open-minded religious congregation such as ours.

Still, I would like this morning to offer my own reasons as to why people might want to come to church – my own talking points, if you will. Apart from favorite portions of the order of service, I think there are some larger reasons. And many of them have to do with the purpose of religion in our lives.

One of the classic metaphors for thinking about human beings and their spirituality is to think of them as containers, as cups, if you will. In several places, the Bible describes human beings as vessels who must be filled with the spirit. God is the potter and we are the clay that the divine fashions into potential containers of spirit and soul. While that is an apt comparison, there is another I find even more compelling. It is an image you saw me illustrate this morning, and I suspect it is one you will hear me use periodically. You see, there is no doubt that we human beings are vessels for the spirit, *but* we are vessels *that leak*. We are, in a sense, spiritual sieves, who are periodically “filled” with our highest ideals and cherished values but always seem to lose or forget about some of those truths as we go about our lives. Our vessels leak, and we can easily forget about what we truly value and what kind of people we aspire to really be.

Now, I grant you there are different ways to refill our cups. But as far as I can tell, participating in a healthy religious community on a regular basis is one of the best. Maybe that's because it pushes us to consider not only our own lives but the lives and well-being of those around us. There is great power in coming together as individuals, if only to realize that other people around us have many of the same deeply felt needs and issues as we do. You come to realize that the most personal things in our lives are universal. That is something you don't always feel standing on the side of a soccer field or serving a tennis ball or walking through the woods. In a sense then, church is a place to remember our highest hopes and values.

Moreover, going to church is time when we can come together and learn and practice the lost art of building community. In the hustle and bustle of our 21st-century society, it is often very easy to get lost in the competitive pressures of our culture and world. It is so easy to follow the dictates of our Outlook calendars and online invitations and pursue our own individual schedules and success. It is so easy to forget about our responsibilities for the well-being of others. To return to the Good Samaritan study with which I began this morning, it is so easy to get caught up in the urgency of our own life dramas that we forget about or disregard the person lying on the ground and in need. And quite often the people we encounter who are in need are not lying on the ground. Even so, they benefit from someone taking even just a moment to express care or concern.

So this is at least one reason I come to church. It is a place that does not regard me as a consumer or a customer, or as a work team member or staff member, but rather as a child of God. It is a place that reminds me also that I am at my best when I am able to treat other people as children of God as well.

But this is only one reason I come to church. There are others. I come to church so that I might have a moment to relax and reflect on deeper things. The Bible tells us that for six days we shall work and strive in the world, but on the seventh day, we should pause and rest. The seventh

day is for Sabbath, a Hebrew word that literally means rest. But this day is for a special type of relaxation; it is not a day on which you are supposed to do whatever you want and get the laundry done. That is all well and good, but there is more to the idea of Sabbath. It is an invitation to fill your cup once again. It is the opportunity to do a few activities that remind you of what is important in this life and to remember who you want to be. It is the beckoning to set aside some time for inspiration, caring, and re-creation.

This brings me to three other reasons why I come to church on a regular basis. The first is to confess my faults and remember who I would like to be. I find that I like myself the most when I am focused on something greater than myself, when I am humble but engaged. I need a place to come and confess my concerns and actions from the week, if only to myself. I need a community that reminds me that it is okay to stumble and occasionally do things that I am not proud of, as long as I recognize my actions and resolve to do better. After a week's worth of activity in our society, I need a place to be cleansed of my attitudes that I develop. I need a place that reminds me that I am striving not only in the world but also in the kingdom of God. I need a place that tells me to, as we heard Jesus say in the reading from Luke this morning, "seek ye first the kingdom of God..., and all these things will be added unto you." Phrases like that help me regain my bearings and right my perspective.

In addition, I come to church because I want to have my own life situation placed in a larger context. I want to know about and consider the major issues of the day and how we, as people of faith, can bring our actions, resources, and good will to bear on making the world a better place. Churches like this one have a long history of speaking to the challenges we face as a society and world and then connecting that to our faith lives. It helps me to remember that while my faith is personal, it can never be private. Jesus talked about the coming kingdom of God, and that word "kingdom" had and has very real-world implications.

Finally, there is one more reason I come to church, and perhaps this is the most elusive but most important. I come to church to worship: to stand amidst a place I regard as holy, a place set apart from my regular world, with the hope of somehow connecting to an ineffable presence that is much larger than myself. And it is through my worship, through my recognition and giving thanks to that Graceful presence, that I find my soul renewed and my outlook transformed. And it is through my attempts to reach out to this presence that I find healing, acceptance, and peace.

So there they are: several reasons to come to church. To be filled up, to be inspired, to create community, to confess, to improve the world, and to worship. These are my reasons and perhaps some of them are yours.

I am reminded of the famous line by Dag Hammarskjöld, the second secretary general of the United Nations, economist, and writer. He once famously wrote:

"Each morning we must hold out the chalice of our being to receive, to carry and to give back."

I pray this morning that we each find something that we need during this hour of worship and reflection. I pray that we each will hold out our vessel – our cup – to one another and to God and find ourselves refreshed and renewed. That is, after all, why we go to church in the first place. Amen and Amen.