**Why.**

**Exploring the Answer to Everyone’s Question**

Message 3 – “Why We Gather”

St. Paul’s United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

June 21, 2020

David Grey,

Chair of our Strategic Planning Team and Candidate for Ordained Ministry

Good morning, good afternoon, and good evening! Welcome back to Sermon Time. Before we begin, let us enter a moment of prayer:

Father, we are living in unsettled times. Yet, we can take comfort in You, the constant in our lives. You are the Alpha and Omega, the beginning, and the end. Father, as we listen to the message you have for us this morning, open our hearts and minds to it. In Your Son’s Name, I pray. Amen.

Why do we gather? One of the things we all long for during this time of pandemic is gathering. Frankly, at this point, I think it could be any type of gathering. The one thing that has affected us all is the loss of gathering, especially with family and friends. To have the ability to interact with people, whether known or unknown, to see them smile, to hear them laugh, to listen to them - this is a constant in our lives. Yet, in this time of pandemic, we have become unmoored from those everyday anchors in our lives. One of those anchors is gathering as a community in the church building.

We are creatures of comfort and we expect a certain amount of order in our lives. During times of chaos, we hold tighter to things that bring us comfort. One of those things that brings comfort is attending church. We expect to sit in our pew. We expect to listen to the hymns or songs we always listened to. We expect to hear a sermon, whose length needs to be at most 25 minutes because we have things to do. Then, if everything is done before lunchtime, we go out into the world…right back to our comfortable lives.

As we walk through this message series, entitled “Why”, we are looking at the explanations for parts of the Christian life. The purpose for this is when there are times of chaos in our lives, we have something to anchor us that is stronger than all the comforts in the world, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

This week we are looking at why Christians or Christ-Followers gather using both the Bible and the Methodist heritage to explain the reasons for gathering as a community.

My full-time job is not in ministry. The job I work is working in the field of community development. My job is to help communities become healthier, particularly those with high percentages of low-income individuals. It is not easy as everyone has their own idea of what their community is and how it should look.

To begin, we must define what a community is. The Oxford English Dictionary has two definitions for the word. The first definition is: “A group of people living in the same place or having a characteristic in common.” The second definition is, “A feeling of fellowship with others, as a result, of sharing common attitudes, interests, and goals.”

So, we have by the definitions above, a community at St. Paul’s. I think we all can recognize that. But why do we gather as a community? The first place we can look to is our Wesleyan Heritage. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, believed living holy lives required believers to share their lives in intimate fellowship on a regular basis. The system designed by Wesley was divided into three parts: societies, classes, and bands.

A society was a larger gathering where the principles of Methodism were presented, using lecture, preaching, public reading, and hymn singing. During these times, people sat in rows, women and men were separated, while they listened to the lecture.

A class was a small group ministry. The class was an intimate gathering of 10-12 people who met weekly to support each other’s spiritual growth. The classes were coeducational (women were also in leadership roles) and diverse. Wesley wanted the classes to represent a cross section of Methodism, so the makeup of the members was diverse, including differing ages, social standing, and spiritual readiness.

The leaders of each class would share honestly about their failures, sins, temptations, or inner battles. The meetings centered on personal experience, not doctrine or biblical information. Class meetings provided community and the development of deeper relationship and spiritual accountability for those who were struggling with habitual issues. The goal of the class meeting was perfect love.

The final gathering was a band. A band was made of groups of the same gender, age, and marital status. Bands were voluntary groups of people who professed a clear Christian faith and who desired to grow in love, holiness, and purity of intension. Hallmarks of bands were ruthless honesty and frank openness. Wesley termed the central function of the band as “close conversation.” They were designed as soul-searching examinations, not so much of behavior and ideas, but of motive and heartfelt impressions.

When you hear about our heritage as Methodists, what are your first thoughts? For myself, the first thought I had was, “How quaint.” Could you imagine the reaction if we divided our Sunday morning worship services by gender, with men on one side and women on the other?

Another reaction I had was to realize how much work we still must do to honor our heritage. At St. Paul’s we have small groups, but are we only connecting with those who we are comfortable with? There is immense value in what John Wesley did by combining ages, genders, and those with differing spiritual needs. Through these combinations, “walls” were able to be torn down and I would imagine, there was a recognition of an individual’s immeasurable worth beyond what was seen on the surface.

I have participated in three different small groups during my time at St. Paul’s. In all the groups, my wife and I were the youngest to participate. This is not to knock those groups, but we tend to focus on the reasons why we should not rather than the reasons we should. One of those reasons is the “disconnect” between older-aged adults and young adults within the church, and the perception that age is the reason for the disconnect. However, I would argue within every group there is never complete agreement on most things. Yet, when you think about a person’s life, there are events, while the circumstances may be different, the principles are the same. When we come together with open hands rather than closed fists, we become stronger together.

The other thing that caused me to react was the small groups (the class and bands) and the vulnerability required to participate. How many of us are willing to share openly with a group of friends? How many of us can share our true selves, warts, and all? It is hard to put down our shields and allow others to see us. Yet, the groups formed by Wesley were focused on ensuring the individuals in the group were moving on to Christian perfection. In the United Methodist Church, we believe there are three types of grace: prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace. Sanctifying grace draws us towards Christian perfection, which was defined by Wesley as, “a heart habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor” and “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.”

This does not mean moral perfection or being without sin. Rather, perfection for Wesley was a sense of maturity. He believed we could become perfect in love in this life. However, he also understood we could not get to sanctification on our own.

I have discussed what our Wesleyan heritage tells us about why we gather. What about what the Bible states? The primary Bible verse today is **John 17:20-24**. This verse is part of what is called the High Priestly Prayer. It is the longest prayer by Jesus recorded in the Gospels. Jesus is praying a prayer of intercession, not only for his eleven apostles but also for the coming church. Using the English Standard Version, Jesus prays:

*I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.*

There are three ideas included within this prayer. First, Jesus asks that his followers be incorporated into one body. A commentary by Mathew Henry about John 17, summarizes it this way:

Father, look upon them all as one, and ratify that great charter by which they are embodied as one church. Though they live in distant places, from one end of heaven to the other, and in several ages, from the beginning to the close of time, and so cannot have any personal acquaintance or correspon-

dence with each other, yet let them be united in me their common head.

The summary is comforting. Even though we may be living through a time of physical distancing, we are all still united with not only each other, but all through Christ.

The second is that we may be stirred by the one Spirit. One of the commentaries I read put it this way: we are all stamped with the same image, superscription, and influenced by the same power.

The final part of the prayer is that we be knit together in the bonds of love and charity and be of one heart.

We see this prayer put into action in the Book of Acts. On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter preaches to the masses, asking them to repent of their sins, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. As a result, Luke records the following:

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles, teaching and the fellow-*

*ship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came down*

*upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through*

*the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day,*

*attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved* (**Acts 2:42-47**).

Can you imagine what that looked like? What it felt like? Imagine being the Apostles! They enter Jerusalem and are greeted as conquering heroes by the Jewish Community. Then, their worlds are torn apart and they scatter, scared and not knowing what direction to take next. Finally, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, they go out into the world and preach about Christ, and God multiplies their numbers daily.

What would it look like if one Sunday, 1,000 people showed up to St. Paul’s? And then, the next Sunday another 1,000? It would be chaos. What would our reaction be? What was the reaction of the Apostles?

They continued to preach, and their numbers continued to swell. Luke states:

*Now the number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and*

*no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but*

*they had everything in common…There was not a needy person among*

*them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and*

*brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet,*

*and it was distributed to each as any had need* (**Acts 4:32, 34-35**).

This is the result of Jesus’ answered prayer. They were living as one community. They willingly sold their possessions and gave the profits to the community. Yet, everyone was taken care of.

Would we be willing to go as far as these first Christ-Followers? Would you sell your house, give the profits to St. Paul’s, and then move into the church, along with everyone else? Undoubtedly, some of you are thinking, “you first” and I must be honest, I would struggle with doing that. I like being comfortable, and so do you.

The final point I want to make is we are more than a building. The followers of Jesus Christ were never meant to be tied to a building or an address. The idea of a church building was never the intent. In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus states:

*And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church,*

*and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

The word church in this passage is not what you think it is. The Greek word is ***ekklesia***, which refers to ‘a gathering of people united by a common identity and purpose.’ In other words, a community. Yet, somewhere along the way, like a bad game of Telephone, ***ekklesia*** was substituted with the German word, ***kirche***. These words mean two different ideas. A ***kirche*** is a building for gathering. An ***ekklesia*** is a purposeful, powerful gathering of people united by identity and purpose. Andy Stanley, in his book, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend*, writes, “You can lock the doors of a kirche. Not so with the ekklesia of Jesus.”

He continues with a question, “What does all this mean for those of us called to lead and shape the 21st Century ***ekklesia*** of God?” This introspection may cause us to ask questions like:

* Are we moving or simply meeting?
* Are we making a measurable difference in our local communities or simply conducting services?
* Are we organized around a mission or are we organized around an antiquated ministry model inherited from previous generations?
* Are we allocating resources as if Jesus is the hope of the world or are the squeaky wheels of church culture driving our decisions?
* Are we ***ekklesia*** or have we settled for ***kirche***?

Those questions may make some of us uncomfortable. Some of you may be crossing me off your Christmas card list for asking them, but if we intend to ignite revival in this world, we cannot play it safe and we cannot cling to our comforts. We must deny ourselves daily, take up our crosses, and follow Christ.

My sermon focused on explaining why we gather. We gather because we are a community of Christ-Followers and in our DNA is a longing for fellowship. Yet, that is not what defines us. We are not defined by a building. We are not defined by the songs we sing or the ways we worship. We are not defined by the numbers on the bottom line or in the pews. We are the Church of Jesus Christ. That is who we are. We must go out into the world as uncomfortable as that is and proclaim the Good News. We must untether ourselves from our anchors and sail into uncharted waters, guided by the Holy Spirit. Amen.